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# Drive: My Motivation For Becoming A Holistic And Authentic Leader And Supervisor Of College Students

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DRIVE:  
MY MOTIVATION FOR BECOMING A HOLISTIC AND AUTHENTIC LEADER  
AND SUPERVISOR OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Thesis Presented

by

Alisha A. O. Lewis

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
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## Abstract

In sixth grade, I did an art project where I painted a self-portrait. I decided to paint myself looking in a mirror. On the right-hand side of the canvas was the back of my head. On the left-hand side was a reflection of my face looking back at me in the mirror. During one session with my art teacher, she looked at my painting and paused before asking, “what happened?” She paused again before continuing that at one point the painting was on the right track, implying since that point, something had gone terribly wrong. I mean what was looking back at me in the mirror was quite scary. It was a girl with sharp, angry brows who was grimacing like that emoji with clenched teeth. By the end of the project the painting only got uglier and unfortunately lived in my family’s home for years to come. My mom once told me that “interesting” isn’t necessarily a good thing. It was said right after I proudly shared with her that I received a certificate that read, “Most Interesting Art Project” for a paper doll I made to look like myself in eighth grade. Since that subtle comment, I’ve always been careful about how I choose and use words. I didn’t dare challenge my mom’s comment. Instead, I recall being mad at my art teacher. How could she call my paper doll interesting! What did she mean by that? I’ve always been better with paper than paint and I knew that unlike my self-portrait that I had painted two years prior, this doll I constructed, complete with my ponytail and 空手着 (karate uniform) actually looked like me!

It’s been over a decade since these two “art incidents” but oddly enough these stories are quite telling about my current self-perception. This is the power of storytelling. Not only does it help me to connect with people beyond small talk but writing and reflecting on my past has helped me understand who I am now. Today I am an educator, supervisor of students, and a young professional in higher education. More than titles or positions I hold, I find meaning in the relationships I build with my colleagues, students, mentors, and community. What I have learned and hope to share to all educators, staff, students, and leaders by way of writing this thesis is the value and necessity of exploring, unlearning, and challenging yourself to understand who you are, how you are who you are, and why you are who you are. While recognizing that I have changed and will continue to change through growth, learning, and time, I find security at this intersection of past and future where I am present in this self. As someone who is empathetic, I am sensitive to other people’s feelings and emotions. With context, I attempt to understand how someone else may feel still while recognizing I may never truly know their experience. On the contrary, I’ve discovered that to be empathetic with my own self is quite challenging! This insight has created inner chaos and has helped me understand how I do and don’t process my own feelings and emotions regularly. As someone who has made it a priority to serve others, I am fueled by keeping busy as a way to have a purpose in all of my actions. I want to be useful. Through this grind, I’ve lost a sense of who I am and valuing myself beyond my work and what I am capable of. I don’t believe this is a unique experience. I have taken responsibility for burning out and running on empty. I am shifting gears. I have taken this opportunity to write my own experiences in hopes that there is something to be learned from it for anyone who has ever taken on too much, has run away from themselves, or been uncomfortable with who they are.

## Acknowledgments

To my time in Burlington, Vermont. I came in as an eager first-year student and have since experienced many “firsts” here. My transformation in these seven years cannot be measured by involvements or achievements or captured in a list of names. From my first supervisors, Kate Strotmeyer and Cody Silfies, to my first mentor, Ferene Paris Meyer, to my first group of friends, The North Beach Group, through all of the individuals currently supporting me through my thesis writing process, my advisor and instructor, Robert J. Nash, and my friend and confidant, Christine V. Roundtree, each of you have been a monumental catalyst in my continued growth.

Thank you to my colleagues and students at the Dudley H. Davis Center and University Event Services who give me a sense of purpose professionally. To each of my communities, Queer and Trans People of Color, People of Color, and interracial adoption communities thank you for seeing me authentically, celebrating me wholly, and validating my experiences. It is with deep appreciation that I have been trusted with the opportunity to listen openly and share in affinity and stand in solidarity with your stories. May our light never be dimmed.

I am writing my thesis to these connections with people and organizations whom I have invested attention, care, and honesty into. I hold gratitude for each of these relationships that have been a driving force in my pursuit for a meaningful life.



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## Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

*When all the good in you  
starts arguing with all the bad in you  
about who you really are,  
never let the bad in you  
make the better case.*

*-Andrea Gibson, ALL THE GOOD IN YOU*

I am making an attempt to demystify my personal experiences with introversion, wellness, and my identities within the context of leadership. Currently, I am in my seventh year living in Burlington, Vermont. I am not the same person I was entering my first year at the University of Vermont (UVM) in 2012 after graduating from West Essex Regional High School in the suburb of North Caldwell, New Jersey. I'd like to believe that I am a stronger, more resourceful and communicative friend, community member, and leader that is a servant to others and myself. This thesis will be a reflection of who I am today, why I am who I am today and the value of becoming familiar with these everchanging facets of myself. Motivated by coffee and my students, I am a creator, visionary, and educator at heart looking to create a sustainable, kind, and just future. The earth beneath my feet and nature infinitely surrounding me, I am a small speck in the universe. As a guest in this world I have made a home out of, I strive to learn from others, be gentle to the Earth, carry no ill intent, and love patiently. If you have ever doubted yourself, have been made to feel small, or are looking for a reason to keep on keeping on, my hope is that my thesis will have resonance for you.

I recently indulged in a young adult novel where the protagonist gets into a car accident and dies upon impact. The community, including her closest friends, is left to

wonder whether the fatal crash was a suicide or not, all while mourning the death of “Alaska,” an intelligent, mysterious yet sensitive, young woman with a bright future ahead of her. If I am involved in an accident, I do not want my friends or family attempting to solve a question of that magnitude: was it a suicide? Compartmentalizing as a way to create organization and order comes naturally to me; to separate my professional “self” from my personal “self,” commitment from commitment, and feelings from experiences. Yet I believe to live within silos is to exist in isolation and inauthentically. I continue to work towards breaking down self-created barriers in a transformative effort to let people in and show a more consistent “self.” Ultimately the fiber that connects each of my “selves” and commitments is my drive to create meaningful relationships.

By elevating visual art, poetry, and writing of artists and writers who share one or more identities that I hold, my thesis will underscore the existing research suggesting visibility and representation are necessary for our everyday interactions to thrive. I live and lead with vigor despite being perceived as passive or as a push-over. I write to give voice to the shy, quiet, and nervous feeling that quivers each time I speak up for what I believe in. Moreover, I write for every time I chose not to speak up or didn’t have a say.

## Chapter 2: METHODOLOGY AND RESOURCES



**Figure 1:** *David H. Koch Theater at Lincoln Center, New York City Ballet Art Series Collaboration with Shantell Martin, Photo reads: “LET YOUR DRIVE AND PERSONALITY COME FORWARD” (2019)*

When reflecting on my time as a graduate student in the Interdisciplinary Studies program, one of the most valuable skills I learned was scholarly personal narrative writing (SPN). This tool has given me the format and confidence to share my story. As an intensely private and shy individual, I have a tendency to take a long time, if ever, to open up to people. Both friends and family have shared with me that they don’t feel like they “know me” even though they’ve known me for years. At times this, paired with my habit of pushing people away, has felt extremely isolating. Scholarly personal narrative has been a style of writing that feels like the perfectly fit template and platform for me to share both “simple thoughts,” as my mom calls my opinions or feelings that would typically come up in a more surface-level conversation, and deeper reflections on

philosophical questions like, who am I, how am I who I am, and why am I who I am? In Robert J. Nash's and Sydnee Viray's "Our Stories Matter," it is written about SPN:

"...what matters most in SPN writing is the meaning that authors impose on the "world out there." Thus, personal interpretation, perspective, translation, and construal are the center of how the author "sees" and understands the world." This is why SPN writing puts the *self* of the scholar front and center." (2013)

When I was first introduced to SPN, it was with great trepidation and skepticism that I entered this idea that somehow, I was knowledgeable enough about anything to write even a morsel of something that could be deemed scholarly. As I read more examples of SPN writing, through the authors' vulnerability, I began putting to paper what I never thought I'd say aloud. Surprisingly, stories from my past came bubbling out of me as if they had been waiting to break the surface. Hot, emotional, rich, unprocessed, raw experiences from my life were beginning to boil from a deep recess of my memories and mind into the tips of my fingers so quick that at times I could not physically keep up. It almost felt natural. Nash and Viray explain:

"We urge our students neither to conceal nor deny the diverse identities that make up themselves. We encourage them to proudly express their storied voices and their multiple social identities. We want them to let their stories ring out loud and clear throughout their research." (2013)

My resistance to opening up was shed during my first two epistolary scholarly personal narrative assignments as a graduate student. This style of SPN is in the form of a letter addressing someone or something specific. My first was written for a Philosophy of Education in Meaning Making course where I wrote, *Dear Body*, and the second for my Religion and Spirituality in Education course where I wrote, *Dear Active Minds at UVM*. The first was a series of haiku, short poetry, addressing different body parts while interweaving my experiences with adoption, gender, mental health, and body image in-

between the poems. The second was a non-traditional break-up letter with an organization that I was an advisor for. I wrote about why I joined the organization as a student, why I continued to stay involved in working towards destigmatizing mental illness on college campuses, and ultimately why I could no longer serve as their advisor. These series of letters I wrote were incredibly powerful because I wrote reflections on these entities that I previously hadn't had the courage to share. Having the process of intentionally writing and editing these letters in the style of epistolary SPN and having received affirming feedback from my instructors and peers motivated me to share these letters with a friend and throughout this thesis as a way to tell my truth.

If my calmness has ever been confusing or difficult to interpret especially in the midst of chaos or conflict, let this thesis be an invitation to the always-churning gears and turmoil underneath that. If my silence or awkward attempts at small talk have ever led you to believe that I am not emotionally moved or don't care, my hope is that this thesis will change that narrative. Now, I am a young professional working with college students. I lead and supervise them professionally. But it wasn't more than a short time ago that I too, was an undergraduate student like the one in your classroom or organization. My intent in writing about my experiences as an overinvolved, hyper-committed student is not to boast about my work ethic or dedication. I am writing this thesis in an attempt to let you into my world in hopes that I am better understood and that my truths will reveal a connection that we share or that you may share with someone else. May my thesis be a conversation starter and prepare each of us to understand those around us individually and openly through exchanging stories.

Through my six chapters, I will be relying on my own voice as a vehicle for telling truths in addition to sharing the influence of artists and writers that have been role models to me. This includes poet Andrea Gibson, singer-songwriter Myra Flynn, and visual artist and creator, Shantell Martin. Each of these individuals have ignited within me a passion for art as a form of self-exploration and connection. Most recently, Andrea Gibson's collection of poetry in "LORD of the BUTTERFLIES" brought me to tears in a way that I have become unable and numb to watching and reading the news about our current national and global climate. Early last year, in January of 2018, I sat in a folding chair in the middle of a packed audience listening to Andrea Gibson's spoken word while I felt my heart fold into a million tiny pieces becoming small enough to move through my veins reminding me how alive I was in that moment. I was shaking, so afraid yet so validated to hear some of my own truths being shared over a mic through their poetry to the entire room. I know I wasn't alone in that feeling.

In an activity I did as a student orientation coordinator, we were asked to share a song that was important to us and why. This is when I was first introduced to Myra Flynn by my mentor and supervisor at her home, endearingly referred to as The Hummingbird. Since that time nearly five years ago when I was breath-taken by her lyrics and my mentor's connection to the artist, I have had the privilege of listening to Myra Flynn perform live in multiple venues including most intimately, a series of annual winter house concerts at The Hummingbird. This last winter, I had a chance to share with Myra Flynn what her music has meant to me. Her lyrics are poetic and relatable. Her talent and voice bring an emotion to life that cannot always easily be read from print. Whether the song is



about love or heartbreak, or growing up or letting go, Myra Flynn's performances have always had me on the edge of my seat or on my feet longing for a never-ending encore.

Shantell Martin has recently released a four-part biopic mini-series titled, "Come What May." In the four chapters, her experiences and reflections on growing up in Thamesmead, attending art school, living in Japan, and being an artist in New York are captured. I was re-inspired and reminded of why I have such respect for her. Having followed her work as an artist since early-on in my college years, I have been fascinated with not only her art but her story. One summer, I wrote her an e-mail requesting to purchase some stickers to share with my staff of fifty orientation leaders and central staff. I used these stickers of her art as a reminder to ask ourselves "who are you?" in an activity where we wrote letters to our future selves to be received at the end of the six-week orientation program. Our staff stuck the stickers that read, "WHO ARE YOU" onto clip boards and water bottles constantly reminding us to pause and reevaluate who we were as leaders and people in the context of decision making and being responsible for welcoming our incoming students and their families.

My thesis is written in the format of an SPN manuscript. Through reading "Our Stories Matter," "Me-Search and Re-Search," and "How Stories Heal," while being a student in Education Foundations (EDFS) courses has prepared me to write six chapters of SPN that will teach the reader about my perspective and perception of the world I live in, in an attempt to teach you something about yours. Furthermore, I will explain the importance of looking inward and its application as a supervisor, supporter, or educator of college students. My support system of mentors, supervisors, instructors, and friends have taught me to value my own voice as a writer and storyteller. I am hopeful that my

thesis will leave you with an encouragement and prompting to trust and share your voice and story too.

## CHAPTER 3:

### I AM INDEPENDENT, BUT I COULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITHOUT YOU: AN INTROVERT'S ODE TO THEIR COMMUNITY AND THEIR COMMITMENTS

*I suffer  
from unrequited self love.  
I love myself, but I don't  
love myself  
back.*

*-Andrea Gibson, DIAGNOSIS*

#### 3.1 Dear Believers,

Dear Believers,

People need other people. It is because of you, the believers, that I earn opportunities and experience success. The first person to believe in me was also the person who abandoned me. Perhaps it was at a railway station or at an orphanage. The details here aren't clearly documented. Sometime in March of 1994, somewhere in Anhui, China, someone gave birth to an infant they could not take care of. This person who abandoned me as a newborn trusted that I had enough strength to be left alone for an unknown amount of time until someone would come along and find me. They believed that a stranger would do the right thing and bring me to a place where there were resources for this kind of care. They were right and I am here to write this story and about the infinite other experiences that I have had because of one decision that was made before I was born. This person who abandoned me took enough care for their own health during their pregnancy to give birth to me. This is love. This is sacrifice. This is the belief that their unborn child has a life worth living. Since my first believer there have been

countless people who have come in the form of teachers, friends, family, supervisors, and mentors who have instilled in me a sense of worth and trust.

Of course, not each belief you had in me had such life-altering implications; the time in elementary school when my choir teacher gave me the solo in “The Little Mermaid’s” *Part of Your World* despite my lack of vocal talent, for example. Yet each of you gave me enough reason in the moment to move forward with a decision that aided my growth. Reflecting on my leadership experiences, it is demonstrated time and time again the influence that you, my supervisors, mentors, and other leaders have had on my continued involvement. Early on in high school sometime in the fall I was convinced by a friend to sign up for fencing. Beginning that November, I was suited up in knee-high socks, knickers, a plastron, a lamé, a glove, and a saber. What I lacked in speed and precision, both necessary to be remotely competitive, I made up with positive energy, dedication, and a hard work ethic that contributed to our team. This is how it went for all four years I fenced. Through the innumerable bouts I lost, you, Coach believed that I was worthy of the title, team captain. Surely there were better fencers than me, nearly all of them, I’d imagine, still there was something in my personality and character that wasn’t reflected in each of my teammates. I was motivated to keep a high team morale, supported my coaches, and would be the first to arrive and the last to leave without a second thought. When you chose to value who I am in favor of skill, intelligence, or talent, I was taught to believe that I had something worth contributing too.

With Fulfillment,

A. Lewis



**Figure 2:** *Alisha on their adoption day (December 11, 1994)*

### **3.2 Work**

As the organization prepared to recruit, interview, and hire a new team member to our department, our supervisor gave us an opportunity to review and edit the list of questions the staff would ask during the interview. The candidate would have a chance to share their strengths and skills along with why they are interested in the position. Standard protocol. After clarifying what the role is that our organization is searching to fill, I asked the room to think about how prepared we felt to answer questions the candidate may have for us. The room was three white colleagues and me. Once the individual currently in this position leaves, I may be the only staff member of Color in our office. I challenged, “if we are interviewing a candidate of Color and we are asked, how would I as a Person of Color be supported in this organization? In what ways does this organization prioritize and promote diversity and inclusion? Do we feel equipped to answer such questions honestly? For me, not easily.” While two of my colleagues stared curiously processing my inquiry, the third chimed in, “Unfortunately, no. There is history there and barriers that make such social justice training and discussions difficult to be at the forefront of our process at all times.”

This conversation was one of many where I spoke up as “THE” Person of Color in the room, widening the perspective and scope of those around me. A simple exercise I shared with my colleagues was to close their eyes and imagine themselves at our next departmental meeting. I narrate, “now look around you. Imagine that in this meeting room all of your colleagues are Asian or Black or Latinx or multiethnic. Imagine that. Imagine that walking into your office every day you see no one who looks like you.” I assured them that this is not exclusive to race and that we all have a part in this conversation. I admitted that even for myself as a queer, interracial adopted, Asian person, I too sit comfortably in privileged identities that have afforded me opportunities without much intention or effort. When I learned that some of our strongest candidates in the search process were white identifying individuals, I felt a sense of relief. They will not struggle as a Person of Color might in the same position, I responded. In the same breath I felt a new-found urgency for me to leave my position as if the clock in the room began ticking louder and louder. I cannot be the only Person of Color in this office I panicked. I refuse. The conversation in the meeting ended with me attempting to comfort my coworkers with, “I love this organization. My critical lens does not negate the work that we do or the service we provide. I am proud to be a part of this organization. Yet I do not know how I would honestly answer questions such as these should a candidate ask us.”

#### UVM BORED

All of my work experiences in college were intertwined with student leadership and development. Lucky enough for me, the last time a job was just a job was in high school when I worked at a restaurant in town as a hostess managing take-outs, deliveries,

seating customers, and assisting the manager with daily trips to the bank. I have involved myself in meaningful commitments that often were student employment opportunities where I would be paid to uphold the expectations of the role while getting much more than a paycheck in return. My first student employment position was with an organization, UVM BORED, that managed the student-run online calendar for events on and off campus. We were responsible for the branded social media platforms that helped keep our campus community informed about things to do in town. We promoted events hosted by student organizations, campus programs, in addition to off-campus and one-time events. In many ways we were an entity entirely behind the scenes, snapping photos at events and posting them without mention of who we are in the posts. Our organization was advised by my first two mentors and supervisors in college. Highly organized, motivating, and detail-oriented, I was continuously affirmed by the leaders of the organization while learning a lot about a virtual world I hadn't previously paid much attention to. I appreciated the structure of BORED where there would always be checks and balances with embedded role models of students who were more experienced and our senior leading the way. BORED taught me how to feel and genuinely be invested in a world I was once a cynic of. The leaders and team members of BORED humanized social media as a tool for connection, creativity, and engagement. Behind every giveaway we did where we posted a prompt for students to respond to on Facebook or Instagram was a relationship we built with a local organization who donated the giveaway prize. For each event we promoted on our calendar was an audience of prospective students and their families browsing whether our Burlington community offered what they were looking for from their college journey or an excited admitted student or orientee who was preparing a

list of things to look forward to in Vermont. Beyond this, our audience was current students, staff, faculty, and community members browsing what there is to do in town. For them perhaps UVM BORED is a bookmarked tab on their internet browser or a website that existed passively as an easy search engine used with little effort. BORED showed me the dedication and intention that goes on behind the scenes to create a seemingly simple yet aesthetically pleasing platform of curated content.

#### UVM Orientation and New Student Programs

This position was the first of many other commitments where success was measured by how “invisible” we were or by how deceptively simple we made a job seem. As one mentor’s and supervisor’s motto shared with me and a team of forty college-students goes, “be a duck.” She explained that ducks always look calm to us because above the water it’s as if the duck is effortlessly gliding through the water when in reality, the duck is paddling furiously keeping afloat by working hard under water. For as long as I worked with UVM Orientation and New Student Programs, this motto kept the teams of orientation leaders, student orientation coordinators, and graduate assistants grounded no matter the level of stress or sleepless nights. To be a duck is to, “Wake up. Kick ass. Repeat,” day in and day out to serve our students, families, and campus, our organization leader would remind the team. To be an orientation leader takes a certain level of pep and cheer, most believe. In most movie scenes where there’s someone going off to college, there’s an orientation leader with a clipboard and an uncontrollable amount of energy meeting the student with unparalleled enthusiasm. This is not me and luckily not what the central staff was seeking in the applicants that winter of 2013 when I applied to be an orientation leader for my university. I recall the group interview process where I wore my



Pokémon shirt tucked into my Pikachu belt made of a seat belt, buckle included. It was the first group process I had participated in and I was both excited and nervous. At one point in the process we were asked to meet with the leader of the organization at either Henderson's coffee shop or Ben and Jerry's. As a first-year student, I wasn't aware that Henderson's was located inside of our student union and had assumed it was downtown. Following that logic as I prepared to meet with who I imagined to be the "big boss" of orientation, I made the walk downtown to the Ben and Jerry's on Church Street completely forgetting one on campus even existed.

I've always been early to meetings for fear of being late. As the time of my appointment approached, I sat nervously at Ben and Jerry's thinking about what might be discussed. I've never been good at small talk. Five, ten, then fifteen minutes went by as it dawned on me that I had accidentally managed to stand up my boss who intended to meet students at the on-campus Ben and Jerry's while I waited patiently downtown for someone who wasn't coming. Embarrassed, I called the Student Life front office to hopefully inform my soon-to-be supervisor of my mistake but of course I was told by the office manager that she was in a meeting and unable to take my call. "That's my meeting! She's waiting for me," I thought as I hung up, mortified. We now talk about this time jokingly because, from that point forward, she always clarified, "the Ben and Jerry's on-campus" when inviting students to meet. This was the first of a series of mistakes that she and I have had to discuss during our four years together as supervisee and supervisor and mentee and mentor. Thankfully these have been balanced out with countless more moments of praise, humor, and business until eventually, we both moved on and we became friends and colleagues when I graduated. Before this shift though, I would be

remiss not to mention the lessons learned from this supervisor and my time with the organization that has become deeply valuable to me as a young professional and supervisor to students.

One. To be vulnerable is to be courageous.

Upon accepting my position as an orientation leader (OL) as a first-year student, I signed up for a truly life-altering summer that led to four years of growth, tough love, and giving back to my campus. Early on in my time as an OL, we were taught that we had self-work to do before giving any advice to incoming students and their families. In the first of two spring trainings, the orientation leaders were asked to bring a meaningful object to share with the group. I brought a pair of wooden carved dolls that were given to me after my grandmother passed away. They were a gift to her from her neighbor and friend at an independent living senior care center a couple of summers back. She had traded a wheat wreath she had woven for these dolls that she treasured. I learned a lot about my team that spring training. Beyond names and what our responsibilities are, I began listening to the stories of the orientation leaders' special objects, their experience transitioning to college life, and what it sounded like for a room full of people who just had met to laugh out loud until we were no longer strangers.

As we inched towards the first of seven orientation sessions, we had a training period that consisted first of an overnight retreat off campus, followed by many stuffy, long days of training, learning about all of the services our campus offered to students. Presentation after presentation from a diverse range of student service providers from departments all across campus. These long periods of sitting were balanced with social justice time in smaller groups that were a continuation of discussions we had during the

retreat. The retreats for orientation resemble a summer camp to a degree with people sitting around campfires, sleeping in cabins, starry nights, and even playing games. But between these aspects that create the fun environment were activities designed for us to dig deep within ourselves to navigate the question of who we are as people in our campus community and who we are as leaders. I distinctly remember an activity that we did with our high-five-buddies, the body project. As orientation leaders, we each had a high-five-buddy that we were responsible for keeping track of during each attendance check-in, someone that we got paired with one on one after large group processing and someone we had throughout the entire summer to have each other's backs.

One of my first memories with my high-five-buddy from my first summer was tracing the outline of her body on a roll of large paper for an activity. When it was her turn to trace my body, I decided to take off my green Vermont fleece sweatshirt in hopes that I would have more of an accurate human form opposed to some gingerbread cookie looking outline. What is significant is not the fact that I was wearing fleece in the middle of the summer per se. What was revealed when I took the sweatshirt off was faded but still healing scars on my forearms. Evidence of my inability to cope in a healthy way with stress or intense feelings. My high-five-buddy also had a large scar on her arm but from a series of invasive medical procedures. It was as if she knew as someone who got many stares from strangers to be especially sensitive without bringing too much attention to the matter. I appreciated that silent yet powerful acknowledgment. Once our bodies were traced, we had time to process what we had learned that day about social and personal identities by collaging "what other people saw us as" and "who we saw ourselves as." I cut out images to represent myself and stuck them all over my "body." I glued on cutouts

of Japanese imagery to represent my mother and Chinese motifs to represent where I'm from. I recall finding a photo of flannel shirts to symbolize how once I find something that fits, and I like, often I buy the same thing in different colors. After finishing, we hung up the tall pieces of paper along the wall of the main space we had and did a gallery walk. This is another way I learned about my team that summer.

To be vulnerable is to be courageous, I learned from my supervisor. This lesson took four years to learn and practice as I had resisted to believe it in my first summer. I was taught what professionalism looked like from my mother, a biostatistician, and father, a corrections officer. My mother taught me what respect looked like in the workplace working directly with clients whereas my father modeled professionalism through his all-black uniform that he would wear each day reporting to the jail. I believed that to be professional was to be a different person than who you relax into when you get home at the end of the day. Through orientation, I was untaught this version of a truth. My supervisor led with her truth, her story, and the mission of the organization at the forefront making for authentic relationships and interactions. Even for the organization that I work for now where I supervise a team of twenty students, I lead with the motto, "you don't need to be here one hundred percent of the time but when you are here, be here one hundred percent of what you can be." This puts the responsibility on my students to be honest with themselves and with me about how committed they can be to the job each week. I prioritize their needs as students and humans before being employees to the organization but in return expect that when they are being paid to be employees, to be prepared to fully commit to being present in the hours they are in uniform working.

## Two. Own Your Impact

To a degree, we as orientation leaders were responsible for the wellbeing of our students we were assigned to. We did rounds in the residence halls the students spent the night in during orientation and we lived there too. If we believed students were under the influence, using drugs or alcohol, or if they didn't make it back to the hall before curfew at midnight, we were responsible for reporting it to our direct supervisor and calling the police. In one incident we were made aware of students drinking cough syrup with peers throughout the two-day session and we were responsible for reporting it up to our graduate assistant. As orientation leaders we were taught to care about students and feel a direct responsibility over our incoming class of first-years. This investment created a highly motivated staff who took their job seriously feeling a sense of authority and obligation to do the right thing as representatives of the university. Of course, in every group of students attending orientation there would be some who believed they were "too cool for school" and chose not to be engaged or "buy-in" to our program. This would pose a challenge to our orientation leaders, including myself, and our returning OLs and our graduate assistants helped to prepare us for this inevitable circumstance.

As an orientation leader I felt prepared to handle situations with nervous or disruptive incoming students and their families. What I wasn't ready for was to apply these same principles to dealing with students of concern or holding students accountable who were also people I cared about more personally. When it was my job, it felt necessary and as a rule-abider, that was easy for me to follow. What do I do when a teammate acts out though? What about when they're a close friend? In the same way that

it's easier said than done or hard to take your own advice at times, I felt it was nearly impossible to follow the same protocol that was in place for our incoming students with other orientation leaders. During my second summer, I was one of nearly ten returning orientation leaders who were in their second summers as well. At this point we all had our first summer to look back on fondly and we were excited to help create the magic we had experienced a year ago. As a part of orientation, incoming students listen to a keynote at the end of the first day of the two-day program that focuses on social justice as it is a cornerstone our university is committed to. Following the keynote each small group led by an orientation leader would meet to discuss and respond to the keynote. We referred to this conversation as "OL meeting two" throughout our orientation leader training and intentionally set aside time specifically to prepare for this meeting. During my second summer, a couple of the returners were tasked with taking lead on this part of the training and what they did was a mock OL meeting two to show our new orientation leaders what they can expect to facilitate. An activity recommended for this meeting as a conversation starter is called, "just because I..." where we share, and correct assumptions made about us by others. I might write just because I am quiet doesn't mean I have nothing to say, for example, to acknowledge the fact that I am shy and don't often speak up but am also letting the reader know that oftentimes I am listening carefully and processing how I might respond intentionally.

During our training that summer, the returners who led the mock OL meeting two invited all of the returners to join the meeting where they "played the role" of orientation leader who facilitated the meeting and we were the orientees. In role play scenarios oftentimes we would take advantage of the opportunity to throw a curveball to ensure

orientation leaders were prepared for any type of question from visiting students and their families. An example of this is learning to address the “groovy UV” reputation of UVM as a party school to parents who are worried about the safety of their student once they arrive to campus for the semester. To teach a lesson about how to address a difficult situation, was the intent of the returner who wrote a racist example as their “just because I...” statement during the OL meeting two training. Instead of doing this, the impact of their misjudgment resulted in shock and harm to our orientation staff that summer. That evening the returners along with the student orientation coordinators (SOCs) met to discuss how we were going to move forward. After our conversation, I reflected on what had happened through writing a letter addressed to our entire staff, from the returners as an apology.

“5/27/14

Dear Orientation Staff,

I will be speaking on behalf of the returners to acknowledge what happened yesterday during OL meeting two training. To begin, I’d like to recognize that within the staff of returners we hold a number of different identities and mu one voice comes from my own experience and to a degree from the privileges I hold.

Last night, the returners with the SOCs had a conversation about the OL meeting two training and the intent of the “just because I...” activity was to equip us all with a productive and reflective way to address social justice with our orientees. But the impact of what was said and used as an example in that space

was people's identities being targeted, people feeling unsafe, and feeling hurt again.

Wow, as returners, we fucked up. We were insensitive to people's everyday lived experience, we were silencing those who were impacted but were scared to speak up, and we didn't honor the voices of people who spoke up earlier this week and allowed themselves to be vulnerable. We are sorry for bringing this heavy and negative energy into our space. We're sorry for the example that was used as an extreme learning moment because we recognize this, for some has now become counter-productive and this hurt infinitely more than healed or helped. Using someone's identity against them in such a hateful and aggressive way, even if only as an example is wildly unfair. We aren't asking for forgiveness. We recognize this takes time; we do want to take responsibility as returners and own this impact we've had. This isn't a conversation to be had in this larger group space but as returners, we are encouraging you to find support from the central staff, each other, and us to continue this conversation as needed. You matter, your voice, perspective, and experience deserve a space to be heard.

As returners, we continue this social justice work and are still learning alongside of you. So, we apologize if we have discouraged you because of what we brought into this space. As OLs, we are equipped with the language and tools to navigate a social justice conversation. Please keep this in mind as we move forward. Thank you."

I wrote because I felt guilty for not speaking up in the moment of the incident. I believe that in this case there were three people at fault. The first is the returner who



wrote the racist example, the second is the returner who read the example aloud to the large group instead of saying “pass,” and the third are all of the returners who did not immediately address the situation, sitting silently listening. As an introvert, at a default I process experiences internally. Slowly reurning the sequence of events, I replay each moment and each thing said aloud drawing my own conclusions and forming my own opinions along the way. Once I do this, only then am I ready to speak up. The following day after the mock meeting incident, after sharing my letter with the other returners, they agreed that I should share it out with the entire team. I read it aloud to a quiet room with all eyes on me. At this point the individual who wrote the racist example still had not come forward, so my apology only went so far because people weren’t hurt by me specifically. As a returner staff we were conflicted about our relationship with each other as it was “one of us” who wrote the racist comment in the first place and another “one of us” who read it aloud, fundamentally rocking the core of our summer staff irreversibly creating tension amongst some. That summer we still excitedly welcomed the Class of 2018 and their families to UVM but the shift in energy was clear to all of us, even to those who weren’t directly hurt by the incident.

Three. Trust the process; you know more than you think you know.

“Good morning and welcome to CATS, the campus area transportation system! My name is Alisha Lewis and I am a first-year in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, and I will be giving you a bus tour of our campus today,” I excitedly shouted to no one while practicing for my first ever bus tour I had been assigned to give. My first summer as an orientation leader, I cried during our bus tour practice in front of my entire

orientation staff because I was overwhelmed about public speaking. Since then I've given countless bus tours through my four summers with orientation, did the registration skit where I had to be silly (which is even more outside of my comfort zone) in front of three to four hundred incoming students and act out how to register for classes, and co-did the welcome speech in front of crowds of six to seven hundred people by my last two summers. Orientation truly has been a gateway for me to appreciate taking risks and challenging myself as a way to grow. Although I was hired to serve a specific purpose, in return what I received was incomparable to a paycheck that somehow, I managed to spend before the end of each summer. Thank you to each central staff member, OL, orientee, and family of a student, who believed in my word, experience, and leadership. Because of you I had a reason to stay in town and experience Vermont summers which made the bitter winters possible and nearly bearable. Having recently co-created the Orientation Leader Alumni Affinity Group through the UVM Alumni Association, I am optimistic that I will continue to have the opportunity to stay connected with the hundreds of people who truly have shaped who I am as a leader and a person. Our hope is that as an affinity group, we can host meet-ups and reminisce on our experiences as orientation leaders, network, and continue to welcome the graduating OLs into a community that like orientation, is built on genuine care for each other, the vulnerability to be authentic, and pride in our university.



**Figure 3:** *Sunrise from Silver Maple Ballroom, Davis Center (2019)*

Dear Dudley H. Davis Center,

You are my favorite building on campus. And that is an understatement. I love interviewing students to hire for my production assistant team that I supervise. Students often ask, “what was your favorite part about working on this team as a student” or “if I get hired, what can I expect from working here?” I beam. This gives me a chance to reflect on our relationship and share with these eager students the pride I have for working here. You, Dudley H. Davis Center (DC) are a source of pride and joy. You are the epicenter of my Vermont narrative. Within you, I have experienced both love and celebration as well as grief and disappointment.

I first met you with my dad during an Admitted Students Visit (ASV) Day, an event hosted by the University’s Office of Admissions back in April of 2012. It’s 2019 and now I directly supervise the student staff who set up the seven-hundred-thirty-two

chairs in the Grand Maple Ballroom and then flip the space into thirty six-foot tables with sixty-chairs in thirty minutes for ASV days. You are at the beginning of my UVM story and now are at the heart of it. I am writing this letter as a way to put to paper some of my favorite memories we share so I can be filled with gratitude when I find myself questioning why I am in Burlington or complaining about my job. I hope this will serve as a reminder to me of the joy in my life when I am tired and feeling hopeless about our planet and the world. It is a big ask for one letter, but you have been the holder of many of my stories that have left impressions on me beyond a quick smile or small talk. Housed in you are many different resources I have depended on like The Marketplace or Brennan's for food, the Department of Student Life, the University Event Services, Davis Center Operations Office, and the fourth-floor event spaces.

I remember a particular experience with shame while applying for a spot to volunteer with Alternative Spring Break (ASB), a program offered through Leadership and Civic Engagement in Student Life. I filled out the application form through an online portal called, The Lynx in October of 2012. One of the questions was about involvements on campus and I had entered "Active Minds at UVM," a student organization whose meetings I had attended once or twice at that point. But upon further scrolling, the application read that "all applicants are required to do a brief interview with ASB leaders to ensure a good match" and with that I submitted my application, closed the screen, and gave up on my hope for becoming a volunteer. In that moment, I had decided that I did not want to participate in an interview and that I would forfeit my application. After having moved on from this admission that I felt underprepared and too nervous for an interview, I also stopped going to Active Minds due to another series of doubt filled

thoughts but didn't think too hard about how I had written this down as an involvement on an application in a recruitment process that I had only partially completed. Much to my surprise and confusion in late October I received a phone call from an ASB Leader informing me of my acceptance into the volunteer program despite me not completing an interview. I was in disbelief but was immediately grateful and confessed that I didn't interview and confirmed that I was in fact admitted. Then it was revealed that I was part of a group that would be travelling down to Jacksonville, Florida to volunteer alongside of post-9/11 veterans who were disabled to do organic farming. I was overjoyed.

During my first in-person meeting with the ASB leaders and my group, we did introductions and shared our mutual excitement for the trip. With only minutes remaining in the meeting I was pulled aside by one of the co-leaders, "Alisha, I saw on your application that you were involved in Active Minds at UVM, but I am involved and have never seen you there," she questioned. It wasn't an accusatory tone but immediately I was mortified. All of the excitement I had for the trip was instantly shattered and for the weeks following I contemplated withdrawing as a volunteer. It was not intentional that I falsely listed this as an organization I was a part of. I didn't know then that I would eventually quit after feeling too overwhelmed to attend the weekly Active Minds meetings because I believe I had nothing to contribute. I thought about it for a couple of weeks and reached out to the co-leader explaining the ways in which I didn't mean to provide false information. She replied to not worry about it and that she had only brought it up as a joke and that if I ever wanted to talk about Active Minds with her, she'd be happy to. This was reassuring and enough for me to not drop the ASB trip, but I felt awkward and carried this shame long after my amazing experience I had in Jacksonville

that spring. Upon returning from break that year, I “re”-joined Active Minds in part because of the encouragement my ASB leader shared with me and in part because I wanted to rightfully earn my spot on the trip and thought by attending these meetings I would prove that I didn’t list Active Minds as a way to enhance my ASB application in the first place.

You have been the keeper of these kinds of moments of growth for me in all of my years of being involved at the University. In my early years as a first-year student this ASB experience was paired with more affirming acceptances such as being hired for UVM BORED and as an Orientation Leader for the summer. All three of these leadership opportunities were offered through the Department of Student Life. By my sophomore year I was part of the Week of Welcome crew and began working at the Davis Center as a production assistant. I grew more confident and trusting of myself as a leader because individuals in positional power believed in me. Hiring committees saw in me what I did not see in myself yet. I believe that in hiring processes that there are two types of hires. One is hiring an individual who the organization needs and then the second is hiring someone that needs the organization. Both candidates are hired with the belief that they will be able to complete the responsibilities of the job, but the latter may need a little more hand-holding, encouragement, and support. This continues to be apparent to me as a student supervisor now directly responsible for hiring, training, and leading a team of twenty college students who work as production assistants.

Proudly Yours,

A. Lewis



**Figure 4:** *Production setup from event in Davis Center (2016)*

#### Supervising Students

Supervising students, like building any relationship, takes time, trust, and teamwork. This can be the most rewarding and most challenging part of my job. However, being a professional who is close in age with the student staff presents a unique circumstance accompanied by its own trials and tribulations. It is a balancing act of being supportive, holding students accountable, and preparing them for life after college. I have found the three c's of student supervision to be a successful approach to working with the diverse needs of college students as a young professional. Confidence, consistency, and care are the perfect trilogy to creating a successful, meaningful, and responsible working relationships with student teams.

Stemming from the mantra learned from my time as an undergraduate student in orientation, you know more than you think you know, is a principle that helps me be confident in the decisions I make. While I will always lean on my resources of colleagues

and campus partners to make a decision that includes multiple perspectives, I have learned the value of my own intuition. Within my department, I'm grateful to work in an office with other student supervisors who believe in the second "c," consistency. Through our progressive discipline plan, setting clear expectations, our commitment to our mission and maintaining professionalism, there is a guide for holding student employees accountable both fairly and consistently in our organization. The final "c" is care which I believe is paramount in all relationships and especially when working directly with college students. Care is integrated into our culture within our department in a way that allows us to practice this in every aspect of our student's employment experience. From our affirmative and inclusive recruitment and hiring practice, onboarding, and most importantly in our day to day experiences our students are given the accommodations necessary to prioritize their academics, health, and wellbeing.

Even when I am challenged by my student employees who make decisions that prohibit them from working successfully, I have learned to patiently approach the student with an open-mind and firm reiteration of what the expectation is. Our department practices the four-step progressive discipline plan in an attempt to manage expectations and create a consistent experience for all student employees when being held accountable. The first step in the plan is a verbal warning where there is acknowledgement between the supervisor and the student that a job expectation was not met. The expectation may be a failure to wear the proper uniform, being late to a shift without communication, or missing a staff meeting. The second step is a written warning where the supervisor and student will meet one on one to discuss the incident and this will be followed with an e-mail. The e-mail documents the pattern and will acknowledge the first and second step in



the progressive plan outlining the date, expectation not met, and recap the conversation had. The third step is a week-long suspension period where the student and supervisor would meet again, discuss the incident, but at this point the student would be pulled from the schedule for one-week and will take time to reflect on whether or not this position with the department is still a reasonable fit, before having a follow-up meeting after the suspension to discuss how to avoid a final step. The final step in the progressive discipline plan is when the student's position on the team would be terminated and they are no longer employed with our department.

It is rare that a student moves through all four steps within our progressive discipline plan. Many students find themselves making no more than one step in the progressive discipline plan while they are employed as we give students an opportunity to have a clean slate after a semester of not accumulating any new steps in the process. If a student fails to wear their staff polo during a shift and has a verbal warning during the fall semester but does not accumulate any new steps throughout the spring semester, by the following academic year, they will have zero steps in the progressive discipline plan. Our hope as student supervisors is not to "catch" students or "get them in trouble." Truthfully, this creates more work for us, and we are always rooting for our students to experience success in their employment with us. To see students graduating having worked with us is a moment of pride we hope to celebrate with all of our students.

As a younger professional who supervises students I used to work alongside of, I believe I have a unique experience with how I have built a trust and unity amongst my team. I have been able to leverage my experience as a student employee as a point of relatability while remaining professional. During my first year at UVM, in the spring

semester I applied to work as an information desk assistant for the Davis Center (DC). As one of the most front-facing student employment opportunities, this was one of the only jobs I was aware of offered at the DC. When I received notice that I was not hired for that position but was congratulated for earning a spot on the production assistant team also for the Davis Center I was confused. With little professional development or guidance at that point, I had interviewed for this position without understanding what production was. To be honest I recall very little from that interview process as I had my sights set on becoming an “info desk,” a term I had heard the position referred to as by individuals already holding the position. Confused, I signed and returned my offer letter and tried to explain to my family and friends what I had just said “yes” to. That following fall I began my first of many years working on the production team as a sophomore.

As a production assistant, our job was to safely and efficiently setup and breakdown inventory for events in the building. We had a responsibility to work both independently and as a team when setting up and flipping rooms throughout the building, working behind the scenes. It didn’t take more than a month before what was once undesirable and foreign to me became something that I looked forward to and trained to become better at. My coworkers who were my seniors lead by example setting perfectly aligned rows of chairs together, managing conflicts with clients, and working late nights into early morning. My investment became nearly unparalleled by my second year on the job when I was promoted to be a shift leader. As a five-foot-tall person who used production as their exclusive workout, I was never the quickest or strongest at lifting fifteen-pound chairs or thirty-pound tables. That didn’t matter when I would be willing to cover my coworkers shifts, choose my attitude, and loved my job. I thrived.

This is not to suggest that the job was always easy or that I never thought about quitting. By my senior year, I had become team lead and the newness of the job had long worn off. My body was exhausted by staging and dance floor and I jokingly stood in the middle of our largest dining space in our building many late nights grumbling about quitting along with coworkers. But after every curse to the heavy furniture and early morning in the building, I would look down at my belt loop to the carabiner of keys to the entire building that would jingle as I walk and feel a level of cool. With this reminder, I would get back to work and strut around the student union in a way that could not be replicated even if I was wearing a new or favorite outfit. Although as an event support coordinator I am on the floor less, rarely moving furniture alongside of my students, I will always be willing to lend a hand as needed. Supervising students as a young professional is never boring. I understand that some of my students do not regard the Davis Center as highly as I do and see their student employment opportunity as a convenient on-campus job for a paycheck. Leadership development is embedded into the curriculum throughout our August training, midyear all-team meetings, and even within our biweekly staff meetings. Ironically, it sometimes has been the students who have had such a high-level of investment in their team who have moved most quickly through the progressive discipline plan.

In one case, a student had overslept and missed their morning shift because they had overworked themselves the entire week in an attempt to help out their team. In another, a student encouraged other students to falsify their reported time to make a few extra cents without working for it. While the first case resulted in a step in the progressive discipline plan, the latter was so egregious that the student was fired nearly

immediately. In both, the students' intent was to have the back of their fellow teammates. The conversations that followed each of these incidents were not filled with anger or shaming the student. Instead I felt it was important for the students to understand how ultimately each of them had to take responsibility for their actions. For the student who slept in, we had a conversation about not overextending yourself and creating a boundary with coworkers to ensure burnout doesn't happen. For the student who encouraged others to falsify time, even though they personally didn't, I informed them that they were not being fired for other people's actions and whether or not their team did in fact falsify time. They were being fired because they believed to steal from our department was acceptable in the first place. Even in these difficult conversations when I find myself disappointed in the decisions my students make, I ensure they know that they made a bad decision but are not bad people. That this one action does not negate all of the previous good. I am currently supervising the last student of mine who has seen me and worked with me while I was a student. As I continue to recruit and hire students into this role, I will no longer have this connection with them. As I explore other opportunities in different departments and other campuses, I will not be able to relate to my students in this way that is exclusive to the current relationship I have had. A fresh start. Surely, I will continue to look youthful and young, but my coworkers and supervisees will not have ever seen me as an undergraduate or even graduate student. Preparing to leave the Davis Center as I grow out of my current role and eventually the University of Vermont means leaving the place I've made a home out of since I was eighteen years old and freshly out of high school. I'm ready.

### 3.3 Volunteering

*The child in the playroom  
doesn't care what my job is.*

*The child in the playroom  
doesn't care about my gender.*

*The child in the playroom  
drew different colors on his knuckles with markers  
and for a moment he was transported from the hospital.*

*In that moment, he wasn't a patient.  
He was in Avengers: Infinity War and had strength of a gauntlet filled with jewels.*

*When we asked him about the gauntlet he lit up, grinning shyly.  
Then his mom lit up too sharing this is the most he'd spoken in days.*

*This is why I volunteer.*

When I moved back to Burlington after accepting a full-time position at the university, I looked for opportunities to break out of my UVM circles. As a student it was easy to not leave campus spending early mornings till dark hopping from one commitment to the next, building to building. I made it a priority to escape this by finding a way to take my mind off of work and be with people not directly connected to UVM. This is what I found when I began shifts with Art from the Heart and baby rocking at UVM Medical Center. As one of the largest hospitals north of Boston, this medical center serves the Burlington and local community in addition to people from New York and all across the state. As an undergraduate student I had participated in a twelve-hour dance marathon called Rallython that raised money for the UVM Children's Hospital which is recognized as a Children's Miracle Network Hospital. Thanks to one particularly long day at work with orientation followed by Rallython, my longest consecutive period of

time in the Davis Center is twenty-two hours, I like to share proudly as a fun fact sometimes. Having learned to not take myself too seriously through orientation, I became more comfortable dancing in front of others to the point where I chose to fundraise and participate in Rallython for three years! Perhaps this involvement planted the seed for me to begin volunteering at the UVM Children's Hospital.

Art from the Heart, connected to the organization Burlington City Arts, has become a weekly creative outlet where I get to make art with pediatric patients and their families. Giving a choice between beads, clay, and paint to these children who don't have a say in the medical plan breaks up the doctors' and nurses' visits with visits from volunteers. Whether we are in the playroom or interacting one on one in the patients' rooms, these short interactions that sometimes happen week after week or are one-time-only are humbling. I will never understand the experience of being a patient in a hospital as a child. Certainly, the future of my health cannot be predicted but I will never know what it would be like to miss school because of a compromised immune system or what it's like to be a child in a classroom or playground that wasn't made for them as someone who has limited mobility. As a volunteer we are only given information on a need-to-know basis so often we are not aware of why someone is in the hospital unless they self-disclose. My meaningful experiences are not limited to the patients whose strength and resilience inspire me but extend to the families. Recently there were four siblings in the playroom while their father and newborn brother were in a hospital room a few doors down. It took nearly all of the energy the three volunteers in the room had to keep the siblings entertained. We played basketball, had a video game console out, and made emoji masks while dancing and listening to a pop for kids' playlist in the background.

Exhausted, we were grateful when we took a break from playing when their father came to check in. One of the brothers shared that when they first met their newborn brother, they cried tears of joy. Another one of the siblings, laughing audibly, shared that in their afterschool program they played basketball and ripped their pants. The youngest of the four was laying on the ground asking which volunteer was going to play with her next. Their energy and excitement could not be contained. As we left the shift, us volunteers looked at each other understanding how chaotic the playroom felt at times anxiously darting our eyes along the ceiling in hopes that the basketball wouldn't hit a sprinkler head. While we were able to carry on with our days perhaps feeling a little drained, I reminded myself to not forget that while I was on a two-hour shift, these siblings would most likely be spending the next week visiting the playroom every day. With this in mind I rarely find myself feeling like I don't have enough time for volunteering.

My second position as a baby rocker at the medical center is often much calmer. In fact, I've caught myself nearly nodding off a couple of times while holding a newborn in my arms gently rocking back and forth in the big, comfy, chairs in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). As a baby rocker I am responsible for checking in with the nurses in the NICU and neonatal transition unit to see if there are any newborns strong enough to be held. I provide the service of physical touch to these newborns who are often experiencing multiple medical complications. The shifts are three-hours long and I sometimes hold the same infant in my arms for the entire time. This is Vermont's and sometimes New York's youngest and most vulnerable population. As I am given these infants to rock in my arms from the nurses, I admire the softness of their skin and hair

while thinking, I may be holding a future president, astronaut, or Nobel Peace Prize recipient! Sometimes I whisper affirmations to the newborns that I hope to be true. You're so strong! You're so smart! You are so loved! I am not sure whether this type of opportunity is supported in other hospitals or if I'll always have the access being a baby rocker therefore, I will never take for granted the enormity of this opportunity to hold the smallest Vermonters and New Yorkers as a volunteer.

### 3.4 Communities

*I don't need to speak,  
for my community to understand.  
Even across an entire room,  
sometimes it only takes our eyes to lock  
to know how each other feels.  
A nod in passing  
even from a stranger,  
can be enough to feel seen  
in my community.*

A commonality between each commitment I have regardless of my affiliation is that I am driven by the connection I have with others. While I have a deep knowledge of our Davis Center inventory and particularly love watercolor paints, why I stay in the roles I do are for the people. As an introvert who is also shy and highly independent, I sometimes find myself pushing people away and exhausted by sitting in a room silently surrounded by people. If I isolate myself in an attempt to preserve my energy, it can lead to feelings of loneliness over time. Thankfully, I found that my community restores me. While sometimes I can lean into the comfort of dining alone, jamming out to music by myself, or going to the movie as a party of one, I also know that there is rejuvenation that



can only occur within affinity with others. More specifically these spaces have often been centered on one or more identities such as gender, sexuality, race, or common interest.

Before coming to UVM as a student I was not encouraged to explore who I am. Sure there were presentations about my heritage or culture days where my mom would visit the classroom and do crafts about Lunar New Year or my dad and grandfather would visit on Veteran's Day. Actually, I loved these opportunities even as a child when my home-life collided with my classroom in a celebration or educational moment. It wasn't until college that learning about myself was regarded with the same importance of learning about science or history though. Through social justice retreats and trainings I began identifying my affinity with specific communities such as Queer and Trans People of Color, Adoptees, and Women of Color. Even while I questioned my sexuality and gender and did not firmly place myself within the LGBTQIA+ community, I was welcomed. Before I declared myself a Person of Color, individuals from this community were looking out for and supporting me and giving me opportunities to explore what the term meant for myself. Sometimes out of pain and survival, affinity spaces are created to heal and acknowledge the harm that the community faces every day. Other times these same spaces are parties, celebrations, and empowerment centered around music, conversation, and food! I am accustomed to looking out for others who may not have found their way into the transformative spaces but may benefit from these communities. Of course, just by looking at someone you cannot tell their stories or all of their identities. Within these communities exists a richness of diversity even amongst the affinity. There is power in numbers and strength in people's stories of love, resilience, and survival.

**CHAPTER 4:**  
**CONNECTING THE HEAD, HEART, AND BODY:**  
**A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO BEING AN AUTHENTIC LEADER IN**  
**HIGHER EDUCATION**

*She told me  
Don't you bow down  
To anyone but yourself  
It's a crazy world out there*

*-Myra Flynn, Expectations*

**4.1 Dear Feelings Body,**

Dear Feelings Body,

I know you can hear me. Well, maybe you can't but I know you exist, and I think I'm finally ready to talk. I believe that every human has at least two bodies. We have the physical body where we experience our senses in. This the one that wakes up every morning and carries us through the day. Then we each have you, our feelings body that is the home to our emotions. When people look at me, they see my physical body. They take notice of my short black hair, my glasses, my height, and maybe my style or how I sometimes drag my feet when I walk. I believe if we take the time to look carefully enough and long enough, alongside of most people's physical body exists an entity that is amorphous and cannot be contained within a shape. This is our feelings body. As such, it cannot express itself and returns to our physical bodies to do so. I believe there are an infinite number of relationships these two bodies can have ranging from individuals who "wear their heart on their sleeve" and immediately express how they're feeling as they are experiencing the moment to those have a more distant relationship where it is as if

each body has a mind of its own rarely expressing an emotion alongside of an experience. When sharing this analogy with a friend and mentor, they shared the latter as a “tethered” relationship. One that is connected but sometimes with a great space in-between.

I don’t recall the first time I became aware of you although I believe you’ve always existed. Ironically perhaps the first time was when you disappeared entirely from my peripheral view and I was numb to feeling anything at all. Sometime between middle school and high school, chaos erupted between my physical body and you, so much so that fearing you abandoned me, I cut up my arms to lure you back in. That worked as a temporary invitation for you to stay in my life but eventually we got caught and it wasn’t sustainable anymore, as violence should never be. Then you left again and this time I didn’t go seek to find you. This is the dull part of the story where like Burlington winters everything looks and feels a bit grey and cold without sunshine breaking through the clouds reminding us what light and warmth feels like. But in the same inevitable way the clouds eventually do part even if only temporarily, you come back to me in my physical body as unpredictable as weather.

This analogy has allowed me to feel more in control of my reactions and not having to justify them when I don’t seem especially excited or sad even when friends may expect me to feel in either of these extremes. How I emote in the moment when I’m given a present that couldn’t be more perfect or thoughtful compared to when I receive a present that I picked through a last draw in an unfortunate gift-exchange may seem eerily similar to most people. This is because my hands slowly peel back the wrapping paper with anticipation, and I see the gift in front of me with my physical body. The feeling associated with this action lives in my feelings body often far away and undetectable to

me. Then days, weeks, or months later after thousands of tiny actions that illicit an emotion, my feelings body becomes filled to capacity and will return to my physical body as it manifests within me in the form of a disorganized, overwhelming energy that consumes me entirely without much explanation. Using this analogy of having two bodies, the physical one and the feelings body has been immensely helpful in explaining to friends how I respond to different circumstances.

You and I still have a lot of repair work to do and we have a long journey ahead of us. From our elementary school years when you decided to visit me every single day on the playground in fourth grade and I was deemed hypersensitive and overemotional through our darker middle and high school years through finally having the language to explain our relationship, we are perpetually in a state of “it’s complicated.” Being unwilling to acknowledge your existence for so long has created what has felt like insurmountable barriers that have led to feelings of isolation. As an empathetic individual, I am naturally inclined to try to understand others and match my emotion to theirs but without having clarity of my own feelings, it is challenging for me to “match my own emotion.” You don’t have a brain. Or maybe you are my brain. I am choosing to no longer imagine you as an entity separate from or different than, me, Alisha Ami Oguri Lewis. You are five feet tall too, feelings body. You may not have physical features per say but you are housed within me and I am ready to welcome you home.

In Unity,

A. Lewis

## 4.2 Compartmentalizing

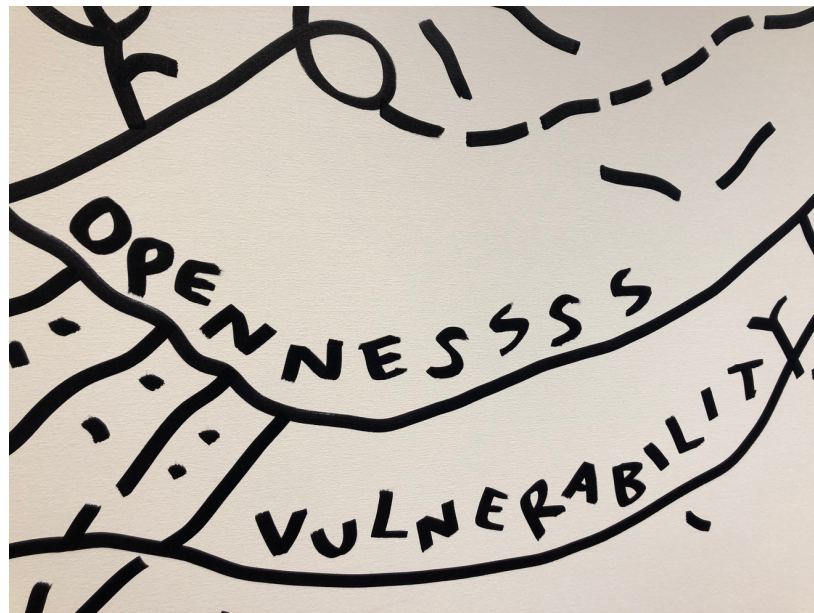
July 2018

Dear Self,

Today you are speechless. You cannot put to words what this leadership institute has meant to you. You experienced a feeling that was foreign to you. “I have never wanted to live as much as I do in this moment,” you believed. You’ve never felt so excited or motivated to live. What this leadership institute has taught me, you can’t quite explain yet, but you know, “I am stronger and better because of it.” You had a conversation with a fellow compartmentalizer last night that was the beginning of an important change in your life and hopefully a friendship that is so special to you. Be kind and be authentic.

With patience,

A. Lewis



**Figure 5:** *Shantell Martin canvas that reads “OPENNESSSS, VULNERABILITY” (2019)*

Dear Fellow Compartmentalizer,

We had a conversation that changed my life. What you shared with me, friends have shared with me time and time again, but it wasn't until you said it that I believed it to be true. We had met only a week prior but in that short time I felt inspired by you, was vulnerable with you, and trusted your words. You are a fellow compartmentalizer, introvert, and leader. I too am all of these, but you have more experience than I do professionally and are few years my senior. You admitted to me in our conversation that babies don't have the "awe" effect on you naturally so when you see a baby, you have to tell yourself, "smile, the baby is *cute*" because other people expect you to react in this way. It wasn't this secret though that originally prompted me to seek you out amongst a group of twenty student affairs professionals at the leadership institute this past summer.

The Leadership Institute

As a professional staff member of the Dudley H. Davis Center, I have been given a membership to the Association for College Union's International (ACUI). Up to this point, I have had the privilege of attending two annual conferences and two regional conferences where on top of all of the expected experiences such as all-conference keynotes and educational sessions, I toured student union buildings on college/university campuses. I learned about the chairs, tables, storage spaces, room capacities, and all kinds of facilities and operations facts that only members of ACUI tend to find absolutely intriguing. After stepping foot into the wonders of ACUI's conferences I was hooked and got permission from my supervisor to apply for a professional development opportunity called the Institute for Leadership Education and Development (I-LEAD®), a six-day

leadership institute for undergraduate students. At that time there was no way to have predicted how much of a personal development opportunity this would be as well. I-LEAD® was the overdue catalyst for change in my confidence and my relationships.

Once selected as a small group facilitator after an elaborate interview process, submitting my institutional support form, and attending three webinar sessions, I was off to West Chester University in Pennsylvania for training of the facilitators for two and a half days followed by a six-day leadership institute. The training for the small group facilitators was the most difficult part for me. I arrived in Pennsylvania from Vermont by teeny tiny airplane and was off to what felt like the first of many team building activities. I had to meet other small group facilitators who had landed at a similar time as me but from all across the country to different terminals at the airport. Thanks to one of the facilitators and a group messaging app, we were able to meet in the middle and wait until our ride, a big white fifteen passenger van, came to pick us up and take us to West Chester University. Like a true university experience, all of the facilitators, staff, and students stayed in a residence hall with roommates for the duration of I-LEAD®. This was our next team builder.

### Our Introduction

The first time I met you in person, Fellow Compartmentalizer, was during our dinner with the facilitators that first evening in downtown West Chester. You ordered a chicken pot pie in the middle of the summer and I commented nervously about growing up eating pot pies as a comfort food with my family. I was feeling new-people-nervous trying to make small talk over dinner because looking around me I noticed everyone

laughing and looking like they were having fun getting to know each other. I on the other hand was overwhelmed with remembering names, forgetting who I am and anything remotely interesting about me while introducing myself, and knowing that I did not have a room alone I could retreat to at the end of the long day.

As a part of our facilitator training, we were given an opportunity to complete most of the exercises we would be doing with our students. These included team builders such as “Win as Much as You Can” and “The Maze” where we were tasked with a challenge we had to solve together. Between these we shared meals together, learned about leadership together, and shopped together. Together, together, together. As an introvert this constant peopling was exhausting, and I began to feel ill equipped to lead a team of excited and energized students at I-LEAD<sup>®</sup> because I may not be “fun enough” or at least not as much fun as the other small group facilitators. I shared this insecurity I had with you and the rest of the facilitators during a reflection to which you and another large group facilitator shared that you understood but not to worry. Being your authentic self was encouraged and you lead by example.

During one of your introductions you shared that you had a rule about “three-second hugs.” You don’t like physical touch and at maximum, you might hug someone for three-seconds. I lit up when I heard this because I too am not naturally “touchy” with most friends and definitely not with strangers. Another connection. Many of the small group facilitators were highly affectionate and collectively would do massage trains or cinnamon bun hugs. This is where people would form a line by holding hands and the person at one end of the line would begin by spinning into the line wrapping their body with the others until one large roll up of standing bodies were made! You asserted, “I will



stand in the middle surrounded by the cinnamon bun hug but please don't touch me," and kindly you invited me in too knowing this might be my preference. Alternatively, you'd stand at the end of the line to be sure you'd be among those who end up being the outer layer of the cinnamon bun instead of your hands being held and body pressed between the body heat of twenty people. This is important for two reasons I wouldn't have been able to foresee at that time, Fellow Compartmentalizer.

One. Nearing the last day of the institute after our conversation on that couch that I referenced at the beginning of the letter, you asked to hug me, and I shyly but excitedly accepted the offer and I knew it meant something to both of us. For our connection to manifest physically through this more than three-second hug was both comforting and affirming in ways I cannot express verbally even though I love words. Second. Once I returned to my own campus at UVM and was preparing for the upcoming semester, I made a simple decision that I didn't even realize I had the choice to make. I am not going to hug my students anymore. Until our interactions and seeing you role model this at I-LEAD® I had felt an obligation to lean into the discomfort and validate others in the way they want to be affirmed through hugging, if that was their preference, even if it was not my own. You helped to teach me it's okay to create boundaries and I don't owe my body or my space to anyone for the sake of being polite and not wanting to offend anyone.

More Similar Than Different

Before the facilitator training concluded there was a major moment that shaped my understanding of what I-LEAD® is and isn't. It came about when it was boldly stated to clarify that, "I-LEAD® is not a social justice institute, it is a leadership institute" which fell upon confused and silenced ears. From my experience at UVM, each student

leadership role I took on came with an expected participation for training that involved job-specific skill building as well as a social justice component. I know that leadership is not necessarily synonymous with social justice but in my experience, it had been taught this way. Looking around the facilitator room during training at I-LEAD® I noticed that between the two ACUI staff members that joined us was a white woman and an Asian American woman. All four large group facilitators, who are responsible for teaching the leadership curriculum, were white. Of the small group facilitators was a fairly even mix between men and women but most were white and there were few if any who were openly out and identifying as LGBTQIA. This is why when it was emphasized that I-LEAD® is not a social justice institute it felt briefly as though I ought not to challenge the whiteness or any “-isms” that could be at play when we discussed leadership. There were a couple of small group facilitators that I grew to know and developed a friendship with over the course of the institute with whom I was able to voice these concerns I had. One was a student affairs professional who currently resides in Georgia who is a strong, resilient woman of Color who loves reality television, has a compatible sense of humor that had us laughing unstoppably, and has a heart more compassionate than most despite having experienced loss that could have hardened her.

"The I-LEAD® 2018 curriculum is designed to emphasize the key concept areas of leadership, community development, and change. The institute prepares students to develop skills that will serve them as leaders in any situation, regardless of role, organization, or environment. The participants will leave I-LEAD® ready to initiate change for the betterment of the campus, their community, and their world." (I-LEAD® Institute Overview, ACUI)

When I spoke up during one of our large group sessions that was led by you and another large group facilitator where we discussed expectations of each other as

facilitators, I shared that I had felt silenced when we were encouraged and reminded to not think about I-LEAD® as a social justice institute and your response shifted my entire mindset. Candidly I shared that as a queer, Asian individual the world sees me in my social identities before my personal identities constantly. People don't see confident, eloquent, coffee-drinker, creator, and leader when they meet me. I am reminded by strangers that they see, "young, passive, smart, Asian boy-child" and because I am perceived in this way when I live as my authentic self, I cannot separate my social justice self from my leadership self. But then it clicked. You and I-LEAD® were not asking me to choose one part of me over another but calling it a leadership institute rather than a social justice institute was intended to be an invitation for everyone to join the conversation opposed to many social-justice-centered environments that can be exclusionary to those with dominant identities. You said, "thank you for sharing," validating my experience while widening my understanding and interpretation by providing more context.

"There will be students who share different ideologies and values than you. There may be students who challenge your beliefs. Students are coming with an infinite number of stories and experiences and we, as facilitators are not attempting to change anyone. We must listen. We are here to facilitate growth but not to prove what is right by our standards," explained the other co-large group facilitator. Oh! I like this. In many of my previous experiences at UVM, people who held more dominant identities were asked to listen and not speak, to own their privilege and not create more harm, to do their own self-work and become educated about experiences that were not their own. I do not disagree with this approach, but I also know that this isn't an entry point to engage all

voices and experiences. I think that both the “everyone can be a leader” and social justice, “creating equity by understanding our privileges,” perspectives are valuable and necessary for a holistic, *who am I and what can I do*, look inwards and *creating a more equitable and just world*, action-based look outwards. With this new understanding in hand I felt more prepared to take on the six-day institute with my small group of twelve students and co-small-group facilitator, an amazing, energized, kind-hearted, fun leader that couldn’t have been more different or more compatible with me.

### The Impact of I-LEAD®

“This week I had the opportunity to take a road trip of a life time. I met a visionary, a leader, a comedian, a poet, a creator, a change-maker, a hugger, an activist, a hard-worker, a campus organizer, a friend, and a community builder, who each brought stories and strengths that helped us to reach destination: leadership. Each of their journeys began long before I-LEAD® and I trust it’s far from over, but this is where this group is getting off today, ready to embark on their next road trip,” I reflected to my students at their 2018 I-LEAD® commencement on day five of the leadership institute. In the same way that I’m inspired by how quickly I learned to trust and confide in you, Fellow Compartmentalizer, I felt this similar awe with my small group and how we each leaned into trusting this process and caring so quickly but genuinely about each other. Our small group’s name and theme was, “Road Trip: Destination Leadership” based on a trip to Target where my co-facilitator and I hand-picked fourteen Hot Wheel matchbox cars and then decorated our small group room at West Chester University with roads and cars along the walls. This room was transformed into a classroom and refuge for our

group where we laughed, learned, shared, cheered (to be honest screamed), and cried together.

Through meeting these students and facilitators from all across the country, and even world, I was inspired. I learned alongside of and from each of you something I didn't expect to. I love my job at the Davis Center and I take comfort in small Burlington, Vermont, hence why I haven't left seven years after originally moving here for undergrad. My community and home are here, especially after my parents and brother moved last summer to the opposite coast now living in Oregon and California respectively. It was at I-LEAD® that I felt for the first time that there's a world outside of my comfort zone that I ought to explore. After each day of the institute our large group would meet up for a debrief of the curriculum and reflect about the day. By day three, it was clear to me that I-LEAD® was exactly what I didn't know I needed but so desperately did to grow both personally and professionally. My voice was shaking when I apologized to our large group for not trusting the process during our facilitator training. I was so nervous about not being able to connect with the students because of my previously mentioned insecurity of "not being fun enough" that I held my breath and doubted all of the team builders and when you and the other large group facilitators tried to reassure us that "everything would fall into place once the students arrived." I began to cry. During our facilitator training we received a binder of information and in it was the "I-LEAD® Universal Statement on Inclusion" that read,

"We strive to create a socially just world that honors the dignity and worth of each student, and seeks to build a learning community centered on *mutual* respect, openness, and to ideas and beliefs, some of which we are just now learning-one which students learn and value cultural and intellectual diversity and share the responsibility for creating a welcoming, safe, and inclusive environment."

I admitted that everything was in fact falling into place just as you promised they would. I shared my feelings-body analogy with the group. This “tethered” relationship I have with my feelings body is at the core of my inability to connect with others at times because by the time I am feeling, often times I have forgotten what experience it is in response to, and therefore cannot share why I am upset and feel embarrassed about this and don’t reach out to even my trusted friends. But that night was different. I shared this analogy like I had many times before as a way for people to understand who I am but this time I was feeling as I shared. I ended by thanking the group for listening. I was overwhelmed.

#### Fellow Compartmentalizer

In an activity about assumptions done with the students in a large group setting, we were asked to write what we assumed about you based on our limited knowledge about you to that point. This "activity was designed to expose the humanness of the lead facilitators by using them as an example for student participants," reads the introduction to this activity, Power of Assumptions. On my piece of paper I jot down what car I thought you drove, where I thought you grew up, what I thought your sexuality, your race, and your religion might be, all while you sat silently with thirty or forty pairs of eyes scanning you up and down trying to draw some conclusions as if by looking at you, we might get a clue. As you revealed your answers you were bashful and said how completely uncomfortable you felt. Of course, I got plenty of the questions wrong but what stood out to me was not what I got right but your use of the word, “androgyny” when explaining your sexuality. Another connection, I thought. This on top of our previous connection about introversion and your insight about valuing relationships with

people, was the catalyst for me to write a note to hopefully make time for us to talk before the institute was over. This was challenging because in the time allotted for wellness breaks which were the only unstructured time of the institute, often we would find ourselves too exhausted by people to want to connect and would stay in our own rooms napping or reading and then after our large group debrief at night, we were again, too tired.

I trusted that our desire to connect over a conversation was mutual and then it happened on the last night of I-LEAD<sup>®</sup>. Even though we sat on this bizarre couch that has a strange vinyl texture and had cushions that slipped out easily creating a distraction in the middle of many other people's conversations, my attention was focused on this much anticipated time we shared together. I began, "hi. I've wanted to talk to you since our facilitator training. I think you are really cool. In the sea of extraversion and energy that I-LEAD<sup>®</sup> is, I am so grateful to see you leading authentically. You bring a wave of calm collectedness that is relatable." You acknowledged the change and growth you had seen in me in just the short time we had gotten to know each other. I inquired, how can someone who is an introvert and private value, above all else, relationships with others? This was my problem, I thought. I had a difficult time getting to know people at the beginning of I-LEAD<sup>®</sup>. I was too nervous and unexciting, I believed. "Look at these connections you have made with these individuals," you corrected, looking around the room at the other facilitators. "I can talk with all of these people and have learned my way around conversations, but that doesn't mean I'll stay in touch with all of them or even most of them," you admitted. "Really?" I questioned, face twisted with confusion. We went on talking about how our introversion manifested. Your friends taught you that

it is easier for them when you share with them bit by bit when life takes its inevitable twists and turns to provide them with context down the road instead of waiting to reach out when something becomes too overwhelming to contain within yourself. Oh? My friends have shared similarly that they wanted me to reach out more claiming they felt I knew so much about them while I disclosed so little. I feel so good most days and when I do feel quite terrible and am kept up late at night by existential questions, I rarely think to communicate this with anyone. Why change, I ask you. Why change when for the most part, “I’m good.”

How uncomfortable it would be breaking the façade of “all-good, upbeat, productive, hard-working, kind me” when most days this is true, and I can trust for every night that I am feeling especially lonely and especially hopeless, there will be a brighter morning to follow. You challenge, “you know you don’t *have* to be lonely or hopeless alone.” What if instead of compartmentalizing between experiences and feelings, or relationships and roles, you were always your authentic self through and through, being and feeling in the moment, wouldn’t that be better? Well, not better but less restraint, less stress, less waiting for the other shoe to drop, you suggest. Until this conversation, when my friends urged me to be more honest with them about my feelings, open up more, get less busy as a way to make more time for me or others, I resisted thinking, they want me to change for them because I am not meeting their expectation of what makes a good friend. I was defensive previously because I had intentionally created this barrier around me to protect myself from getting too close with anyone, to be less emotional. But in a small way, you’re like me. Or I’m like you? It was the first time that anyone who really understood the world in a similar way to me shared that they understood. I believed in a



reason to change. I-LEAD® has given me a perspective and motivation to want to complete my degree this academic year in hopes of moving out of beloved Burlington. You helped me come to this realization and met me with candor and patience as we spoke about gender, loneliness, people, and the future. I gave you a pin of Max from “Where the Wild Things Are” as a way to congratulate you on accepting a new position and a new beginning at a University miles and miles away and as a token of absolute appreciation for your role at I-LEAD® and in my life. Days before our student staff training at the Davis Center at UVM, my supervisor pulled me aside to give me a gift and shared how proud she was of me and my growth in confidence since I-LEAD® and how she believed in me and the training I was about to facilitate for my students. In her hand was a set of pins. I was able to add to my collection again, a Max pin from “Where the Wild Things Are.”

In Connectedness,

A. Lewis

### **4.3 Coping**

I try to not take for granted that I am living. When I leave my apartment for longer than a couple of days, I try to tidy up enough to feel comfortable with someone else entering my room should I not return. I don’t expect to not come home ever but I do believe I’m not invincible. Freak accidents happen all the time. Sometimes they result in illness or injury. Why would I be immune to them? More optimistically, I tidy up so I can feel stress free returning home to an empty laundry basket and clean sheets.



**Figure 6:** *First photo of Alisha, about six months old (1994)*

Dear Safety and Security,

You are wearing your seatbelt no matter how short the drive is. You are taking no risks, stay comfortable, and don't get hurt. You are wearing many layers and tucking in your shirt, no matter how hot the summer day is. You are stifling, always stuck, never change, stable, stay the same. You have many names. You are a stolen adventure. You are me and I am you, we are inseparable. I keep my hands in my pocket, wear my belt extra tight, and always carry Band-Aids. I predict the worst-case scenario and sometimes carry my phone in a Zip-lock bag, so it doesn't get wet in the rain, even when it's not raining. Safety, you make a fool out of me. You are irrational fears and my first friend. I love you, from a distance of course because I don't want to get heartbroken, safety first.

What You Give Me: Predictability & Patterns

I clutch onto you when times are uncertain, and I cannot see what the future holds and cannot make sense of the past. Some people look to religion for answers and believe there is a God or there are Gods. I am not meant to understand everything, and I believe confidently in that. And, I cannot fully comprehend anything that I don't have answers to

so I create reasons and rituals that I can count on that provide me with patterns and predictability. I get dressed in the morning by first putting on a t-shirt and then putting on either a second t-shirt or a button-up shirt, and then putting on a sweatshirt or sweater before putting on a vest which goes under my jacket which I wear under my coat. Sure, eventually I'll dress down to my second t-shirt because I'm human and get hot, but I wear so many layers as a way to keep a safe distance from the weather and from people getting too close. You provide me with predictability and without you I am uneasy. This is why I find transitions so difficult; whether it's as small as an unexpected fifteen-minute break in a busy day that would be taken as a blessing to most, or a more significant change like my parents moving across the country.

#### When I Couldn't Count on You: Cribs & Care Takers

I was born, abandoned, orphaned for nine months, adopted, and have been in a loving family for twenty-five years. Even though I cannot remember the months that I was in China as an orphaned infant, not having answers to why I was abandoned or how I was chosen to be adopted still is a source of non-closure. I remember when my family adopted our little orange cat Eloise in 2009, we were told by the shelter that Eloise was abandoned by her mother cat and left under a porch without her sibling cats. I recall crying for her and being so angry at the mother cat thinking, "how could they abandon such a helpless, new born kitten," so vulnerable and lonely, how unsafe.

#### Why I Thought I Needed You: Refuge & Reason

I look for you wherever I go and when I cannot find you, I improvise with my "just-in-case... tools" I carry. Friends say I am prepared, put together, and personable which is just a gentle way of interpreting how I am a worrier, can be rigid, and a people-

pleaser. I have bright green bike bags and a matching helmet and jacket not because I love green but for high visibility. I have two bike lights on my bike and one on my backpack that I sometimes turn on even during the daylight, just in case...

I startle and scare easily. Now, I know the difference between you and comfort. And that sometimes the tension in my body is because I feel guilty or uncomfortable which is different than being unsafe. In detailing the who, what, when, and why of my desire for you, I am realizing that you are not who I believed you to be. I may have invested too much time and energy into you because at the end of the day, you are never guaranteed. It won't matter how many layers of clothes I wear or whether I have green bike bags, I cannot have full control over whether or not I or others are full-proof safe from all harm. Perhaps this has been wasted energy. In elementary school one book that we read in class was about pet-heroes. There were stories of pets being heroes by saving the life of their owners/families. One was about a hamster who had begun running in their wheel frantically and woke up the owner just as a fire broke out in their home. They were able to all evacuate safely. Another was about a dog who barked at an armed intruder. Thankfully no one was hurt. That night after school I was so scared because I was worried about the different incidents playing out in my home and imagined our cats would do nothing to save us and we could all die. I got out of bed and walked down the hall to the top of the stairs and called out for my parents crying. I was six or seven. My dad came upstairs and sat me down on his lap. I shared why I was so upset, and he explained to me all the ways we would be safe. I eventually crawled back into bed and slept through the night.

I have many fears. I worry excessively at times. In order for me to feel safe, it is helpful for me to understand how I am safe whether it's knowing emergency procedures, being aware of my surroundings, or less practical habits that involve me feeling in control. I don't have control over you. There is only so much I can do to change my environment to be safe. Of course, it is important to operate with you in mind in everything I do but maybe it is time to shift my priority to actions that I do have full authority over. It has been difficult to write to you because I take you into consideration in all I do, and you are a part of who I am. I need to learn to trust that you will be there for me even when I don't actively seek you out.

With Trust,

A. Lewis

Ironically, over the last ten years some of the ways I have coped with uncertainty and difficult feelings have been the opposite of safe and secure. Less quirky than putting my phone in a Ziploc bag but possibly equally impractical in the long run, has been my dependency on self-destructive and impulsive behaviors. An opportunity I nearly lost as an undergraduate student was becoming a resident advisor because I had been caught underage drinking. The weekend following the Friday that I was selected to be a resident advisor for the next academic year, I had had so much alcohol that not only did I blackout but I had thrown up in front of a UVM police officer, had to be driven by that police officer to the hospital to receive fluids, and then taken to ACT 1, a facility downtown to regain sobriety (which didn't happen until over twelve hours later). This was the second time my sophomore year that I had to be taken to the hospital for alcohol poisoning. The

first time a couple of friends who were looking out for me took me to the hospital when they realized that I was too drunk to willingly receive their help. I also cannot recall much from that particular evening. What could be seen as a college student having too much fun and letting a little too loose was actually a symptom of a bigger issue. Sometime during my first year at UVM before I drank coffee regularly and had barely introduce caffeine into my system, I decided against my better judgement to drink three cans of a high caffeine content energy drink one right after the other. Of course, caffeine is different than alcohol but my inability to control this impulse lead to a night where my head spiraled ceaselessly with overwhelming thoughts to the point where the only way I found to silence them resulted in permanent scarring along my arms.

While people may be shocked to hear about this part of my past as a student who was highly involved and even a role model for other students, my leadership has also been shaped by a necessity to stay constantly busy and occupied. I was used to following directions and pleasing others so much so that at one point, I had lost sight of what I enjoyed, what made me interesting, and what made me worth another person's time. I found that to stay committed and involved was a path to having a purpose and goal to work towards which was highly rewarding to me. While I had won awards as an emerging leader and rising star during my first couple of years at college, this affirmed my belief that I was worth something because I was useful to someone else. My hard work ethic and dedication continued to pay off as I was recognized as student leader of the year in my junior year for the Department of Student Life, Department of Residential Life, and the Dudley H. Davis Center. All of the awards I received with an eagerness to show my parents, but I knew that even these honors were symptoms of my overworked

self, unwilling to work through my personal issues that fueled my disconnection with others leaving me feeling isolated and at times, hopeless that change towards balance was possible.

#### 4.4 Connections

*My work is very much about creating experiences;  
it's accessible even if it's sometimes puzzling.*

*-Shantell Martin*

To be “the only” in a space is to be different than the rest. This is not inherently a negative experience. Shantell Martin, my favorite visual artist taught me this. It is sometimes at the intersection of identity and being “othered” that inspiration and an exploration of who we are strikes. Before I had even really come out to myself as queer, I was on the internet looking up, “queer weddings,” “gay women couple,” “QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Color) love” on private browser windows searching for some “normal” happily ever after, cliché story about people falling in love. It was one of these times when I found a photo of Shantell Martin sitting on her bed with the walls surrounding her drawn on from floor to ceiling. Intrigued, I looked up “Shantell Martin” on Google and learned more about the artist, her process, and her story. I have been inspired and bought, shared, and celebrated her art with my communities. Her art decorates my office walls and the simple notes she has sent along with the prints I have purchased are framed in my bedroom. The internet connected me with this artist and this artist has been a way for me to connect with others. To a couple of people who I’ve come to respect and care for deeply, I have gifted art to them from Shantell Martin sharing why her art has been so meaningful to me.

A few years back I bought a series of prints that are precious to me now as they are not easy to come by and are not always within my budget. Three of these are framed in my office and bring life to a windowless space creating a more inviting, approachable atmosphere for my students. One print I gifted to a friend who thinks creatively and curiously. The most recent mail from her was a response to a note I wrote nearly a year back when we lived in the same town. Since she's moved, we haven't had a chance to see each other but we write and text to keep in touch. Last year I shared with her that "in middle school I used to pass notes on printer paper that we'd fold twice like so" and I asked her a few questions in the margins of the piece of paper that I had folded just as if I was back in middle school. In it I wrote, "no pressure to respond if this isn't your style" but I thought it was fun. Nearly a year after the fact, I had forgotten about this note and much to my surprise I received a note in my own handwriting in the mail. On the same piece of paper, she responded with an insight, "I imagine that everything has changed in Vermont, but I also imagine that everything is the same..." along with some new questions for me to answer. In an age where I rely on my phone to tell me the weather while I stand outside and only know my brother's whereabouts through photos he posts on social media, I am grateful for my connection with this friend through our all-caps handwriting and the anticipation of checking for mail. An update that she had written to me shared, "I saw that Shantell Martin is collaborating on a very cool ballet-art project and took a picture I keep meaning to send to you (I'm trying to reduce time on phone, or else I'd send it now)."

Three additional prints have found a permanent home with someone whose friendship means more to me than I'll ever have words for. When we met, we were not



instantly friends although our working relationship was nearly immediate. After one conference we attended together where we were assigned to be roommates, our collegueship grew into a friendship that I will never take for granted. During one session that wasn't particularly engaging we became distracted and began writing down questions we had for each other to answer back in the hotel room. This series of four or five questions became the first entry into our small yellow notebook where dozens of questions have been entered since. Finally, when we both have a break in our busy schedules, we'd go into the yellow book to answer a couple of the many questions we have for each other whether it's "what did you eat for lunch in elementary school" or "who has had the greatest influence on who you are today." While I find it difficult to open up to most people, I often remind this friend that she is not "most people." Since disclosing to her that I don't often find ways to insert my opinions into a conversation but if asked a question directly I typically will answer, this yellow book has been essential to how we have gotten to know each other.



**Figure 7:** *Royal, Apollo 10 Typewriter (2019)*

It is rare that I meet anyone as thoughtful as she is. Having mentioned at one point in a conversation that I like loud typing keys and learning my love of the font, Courier New, this friend bought me a Royal, Apollo Ten, Japanese made typewriter as a Christmas present. She researched and purchased a typewriter that punches each letter with such vigor that sometimes the “.” creates a tiny hole in the paper and my roommate can hear me typing from her room across an entire living room. In an attempt to share my happiness and appreciation, I shared that this precious gift is one that I will hold onto for rest of my life! Although there are many ways in which we have learned to share and show our appreciation for each other, receiving gifts is not how either of us expect to be shown gratitude. In fact, we both are quite shy about receiving gifts and therefore are thoughtful in how we give them to each other. I prefer my birthday to be private with little attention from any crowds of people like coworkers or a gathering of friends. This

winter my friend, her mom, and I went to see Shantell Martin's art for my birthday. I had seen through social media an announcement that there is an upcoming show but didn't make the connection that it would be possible to go. My friend heard about the performance too and asked if I'd be interested and through her spark of spontaneity, bought us tickets to the show, a plane ticket down to New York, and a train ticket back to Burlington.

I'm drawn to Shantell Martin's art because it's always familiar and relatable. The lines are deceptively simple yet hard to replicate. There is confidence and truth in her art that I am moved to learn from. In one interview she shares that written words are just lines that are assigned meaning to them by society. Her work is thought provoking and simultaneously meditative to me as a consumer of her art. The performative nature of some of her creations are a testament to the power of vulnerability. Most recently she collaborated with the New York City Ballet (NYCB) for the 2019 NYCB art series where there were three performances throughout the season where the tickets were more affordable in an attempt to make the show more accessible to individuals who may not otherwise go to a ballet. For thirty-five dollars each, we bought a ticket to the ballet sitting in the first row of the fourth ring overlooking the balcony, access to the art displays throughout the theater, and a gift of a limited edition, 2019 NYCB art series small plush designed by Shantell Martin. The David H. Koch Theater at the Lincoln Center was transformed by Shantell Martin's art with 3D sculptures of her hand-written words atop of a floor covered from edge to edge with her drawings and there were three floors of her canvases lining the halls. In the promotional video for the ballet, the collaboration is represented with her art coming to life through the bodies of the dancers

who become the canvas to her drawings, moving, twisting, stretching, and flowing along with the rhythm of the music.

In the midst of an especially busy and chaotic month in the semester, this weekend was one that offered a brief break from the demands of both work and school. Leaving town on a Friday, we took the day off and flew into New York where my friend and I were met by her mother. To this point I had only heard stories about my friend's mom through her, in addition to a couple of phone conversations that were put on speaker-phone, but as soon as we were all in the car together, I began seeing parts of my friend reflected in her mom or perhaps it was the other way around. Making friends as adults is funny in this way. Oftentimes we are making friends with individuals independent from the friends and families they were raised by and until you have the opportunity to meet, it can be hard to imagine what they actually may be like. To meet is connection.

The day of the performance we arrived at the theater nearly an hour before the show and the art exhibit area was nearly empty giving us a chance to take our time observing its enormity. My nearly seven year at-distance admiration of Shantell Martin as a creator and speaker became infinitely more intimate that evening when there was no screen separating me and her art. By this point I was awe-struck and captivated by the art and it wasn't even in my periphery that what was about to happen next would ever be an opportunity I'd have. As I was about to enter the restroom, I heard my name being called by my friend and I stepped back only to see Shantell Martin in the lobby greeting guests and sharing about her art. Stunned, I smiled to my friend and hurriedly went to the restroom only to speed walk past Shantell Martin on my way back to where my friend

and her mom were. My friend looked at me and said, “Look. This is not a chance I am willing to watch you miss. Go.” This was the push I needed to shyly walk up to Shantell Martin as she was talking to a group of women about her installation. Even when she had finished speaking, the group of women stuck by as I introduced myself. Star struck, I admitted to her that I was speechless but couldn’t let this opportunity go to thank her for her authenticity through art and vulnerability. We shook hands and she handed me a sticker from her pocket that reads, “ARE YOU YOU,” famously from her trilogy of questions and declarations she poses in her art: “WHO ARE YOU/ARE YOU YOU/YOU ARE YOU.” My friend captured the entire exchange on video which I am grateful for because I imagine I was too nervous to have remembered the interaction even moments later otherwise.



**Figure 8:** *Shantell Martin and Alisha at Lincoln Center (2019)*

The excitement and happiness I experienced through this dream come true overwrote my usual inability to emote and respond to feelings in the moment. I grinned and couldn't keep still! To be here. To be here with someone so important to me and her mom. This weekend has truly become irreplaceable to me. Even when I tried to share my gratitude to my friend who pushed me into getting out the monotony of work and school to go to New York City for this and who coordinated the entire trip, she modestly refused to take full-credit for making this experience possible. This is a reflection of our friendship. Neither of us do or give with an expectation for a returned favor. Her care for people is not sacrificial or intended to come with an indebtedness to her. As her community continues to grow and evolve with new job opportunities I am deeply committed to our connection and conversation. Through the possibility and challenge of either or both of us departing town for new opportunities, I fully trust in our friendship and couldn't be more in support and proud of her. This is connection.

**CHAPTER 5:**  
**HEART AND SOUL SEARCHING AS AN ADOPTEE: THE RELATIONSHIP**  
**BETWEEN ABANDONMENT AND LOVE**

**5.1 A Body Scan**

Dear Body,

Physical body,  
You are the only thing left  
My parents gave me

Bears my body's weight,  
Navigating, exploring  
The world around me

Cycling me through  
The everyday motions  
On my bicycle

Is this where love lives,  
The good, the bad, the ugly  
Deep inside the heart?

Beautiful mind,  
Who is it that's controlling,  
what you think and do?

Dear sacred body,  
I promise to treasure you  
From now until death

Eternally yours,  
A. Lewis

My body is the home to my organs and my blood. This breathing vessel gives me life. Living here is a privilege because I carry my home with me wherever I go. My body keeps my memories, feelings, and thoughts alive while keeping me warm enough, cool enough, full enough, and mobile. There is strength in my body that holds me up

and allows me to laugh and to eat and experience all of my senses. This is not something to be taken lightly. My body like your body will not exist in its current state for any more than a fleeting moment. We grow. We gain. We lose. We change. In an attempt to capture and appreciate this I wrote “Dear Body,” because without my body I could not express anything. My letter is a body scan starting from my feet to my head writing about the beauty and complexity of my body’s story. As an adoptee, I have no connection to my biological parents, siblings, or extended family. There was no note or photograph left with me when I was abandoned. There was no medical paperwork or family history for me to understand my body. My body and all that has been housed within it is the gift I received from my family. My body is my only clue into my biological world and where I’m from.

When my family and I took a trip to China in 2004 with a group of other families with children adopted from China, we visited the city of Bengbu where I was adopted from. As a fourth-grader I remember being excited to deliver and donate items like backpacks and toys and crayons to the orphanage that had been collected in lieu of gifts for my birthday that year. While there, my parents asked the nurses who were there who claimed to remember me from my time there in 1994 to share everything they knew, off the record. Upon applying to and being accepted to become adoptive parents, my parents received paperwork about their new addition to their family. My limited health information in addition to a photograph were sent to them. In these documents included a statement that notified them that their daughter had been abandoned and found at a railroad station.



When inquiring with the nurses ten years later, my family was told that I was in fact born on March 13, 1994 in a room with a bed and sink at the Bengbu Social Welfare Institute. We were told that I was born between two and three in the morning and that my biological mother and father were both present in addition to a nurse from the orphanage. After I was born, the nurse left until the morning, leaving to take care of her own family at home. Upon her return, I was still left on the bed where I been birthed, and my biological parents were nowhere to be seen. There was minimal transition between being born and abandoned as both happened at the orphanage, we were informed. No new documents were given to us then and it was simply through word of mouth that this very different and new story was shared with us. There is no way to tell between these two stories of abandonment what actually happened and perhaps it doesn't change the outcome either way. But the mystery of not knowing the story of my beginning, my birth creates an ambiguity around where I'm from in a way that has inhibited my ability to fully celebrate a happy birthday in addition to my shyness and desire to stay out of the center of attention.

## A CERTIFICATE OF HOU LISHA'S CASE

(Translation)

Hou Lisha, female, was picked up at railway waiting room of Bengbu City, Anhui Province on Mar. 14, 1994. The Railway Station Police Substation sent the child to the Social Welfare Institute of Bengbu City after a careful but fruitless search for her natural parents. The Social Welfare Institute of Bengbu City named the child Hou Lisha. As a result of the doctor have a physical examination, her health is good. According to the examination, the doctor judged that the baby was born on Mar. 13, 1994.

the Social Welfare Institute of Bengbu City (Seal)

Dec. 11, 1994

**Figure 9:** “*A Certificate of Hou Lisha’s Case (Translation)*” (1995)

“Hou Lisha, female, was picked up at a railway waiting room of Bengbu City, Anhui Province on Mar. 14, 1994. The Railway Station Police Substation sent the child to the Social Welfare Institute of Bengbu City and named the child Hou Lisha. As a result of the doctor have a physical examination, her health is good. According to the examination the doctor judged that the baby was born on Mar. 13, 1994. the Social Welfare Institute of Bengbu City (Seal) Dec. 11, 1994)”

### 5.2 Where I’m Really From

Receiving the results of my DNA test was a rather anticlimactic experience revealing that I am 100% East Asian & Native American (90.7% Chinese, 2.7% Korean, 1.6% Manchurian & Mongolian, 1.4% Broadly Chinese (whatever that means) & Southeast Asian, 0.4% Broadly Japanese & Korean, 0.2% Broadly Northern Asian & Native American, and 3.1% Broadly East Asian & Native American). No close relatives were

found in this process either. During my time at UVM thus far I have been empowered and supported to actively engage and identify within the PoC (People of Color) community. This community includes all self-identified non-white and bi/multiracial students, staff, and faculty. The beauty of the stories often shared in these groups are connected to heritage, ancestry, and culture, and to either deeply rooted or newly-found pride in their ethnicity and/or race. Often times this can manifest in a celebration and acknowledgement to those who came before them. Do I believe I am the product of the legacies left from those who have fought for my right to exist safely as a person with multiple subordinated identities? Absolutely. Do I believe I have benefitted from the freedom and citizenship that I inherited from being adopted as an infant in China to American parents? Without a doubt. Yet these truths do not negate my inability to fully or neatly fit into being Asian, Asian American, or more specifically Japanese or Chinese. This can create complexity to curious inquirers but to not acknowledge each truth within these would be to not be truthful at all.

### 5.3 Family



**Figure 10:** *Family photo at beach in Oregon (2018)*

As if it were intended as a compliment, looking at photos of my mother and I, I'm told, "I would've never guessed you were adopted." This remark is a subtle erasure of my experience as an adoptee or my mother's as an adoptive parent. Now with our similar haircuts, same can be said for my brother and us too; plus, we all have glasses. These comments have been shared to me by both strangers and family members more times than I can keep track of. The issue isn't that I don't want to be compared to my mother's beauty. It's that my brother is adopted from Vietnam, my mother is Japanese, and I am adopted from China and therefore to suggest that we look similar is slightly prejudice. Sometimes people will realize in the middle of their sentence that what they are sharing may not land sweetly and they will over compensate by following up with, "...and your dad. Yeah, your brother's smile also looks like your dad's." Now that's a stretch if I've ever heard one! Additionally, the fact that comments like these are made to comfort me as an adoptee or my parents is bizarre, as if to suggest that a biological family is more desirable than a family that adopts. It is said that the apple does not far from the tree. In the age-old question of nature (biology and blood) or nurture (the environment and how we are raised) and which has more influence, I am intrigued by my family dynamics.

Now that my parents are across the country living in Portland, Oregon while I am here in Burlington, Vermont, and my brother a sophomore at the University of California Santa Cruz, my family's relationships with one another have gone through another transition. The first transition we experienced was before I was even born, and my parents began the process of filing to become adoptive parents interested in growing their family. Unlike when a baby is born into a family, when adopting, the individual being

adopted has a history that is disconnected and separate from the family they are being adopted into. For me, I had nine months of experiencing and learning about the world before being adopted into a loving and nurturing home. I do not remember this period of my life, but it has fundamentally altered where I am and who I am today. I am not familiar and do not have access to understanding the match-making process that paired me with this couple from New Jersey, but these two people opened their home to my brother (adopted in 1999) and I irreversibly creating a family of four. With my family, I am home.

#### **5.4 UVM Interracial Adoption Group**

My main intention with being a practicum student at the Mosaic Center for Students of Color was to dedicate time on a weekly basis to supporting our current UVM Interracial Adoption Group. Although this group is in its third year at UVM, there has been minimal structure and has been informal as it has been created by and for the community out of necessity to feel visible, celebrate, and discuss the complexity and beauty of what the interracial adoptee experience is. As an interracial adoptee, I am personally motivated and driven to serving this specific population of our community including students, staff, faculty, and Burlington community members. Interracial adoptees are defined as individuals who are adopted by one or more adoptive family members who share a different ethnic or racial identity as they do. Interracial adoptees include but are not limited to many international adoptees, white identifying adoptees with one or more parents of Color, and multiethnic adoptees.

The question that I hoped to better understand was, what does UVM's interracial adopted community need to feel supported, validated, and empowered? Using the input from members within this community, a plan was created to address this question. This included hosting events to bridge a connection between students who are interracial adopted and either staff or faculty members who are also interracial adopted or between these students and a younger community of kids who are interracial adopted. Like many identities, to build relationships with others who share a similar experience can be incredibly meaningful. Unlike many identities, being adopted or interracial adopted is not visible and therefore can be difficult to bring up socially or within a classroom. Through this practicum my hope was to find ways to normalize the conversation within our interracial adoption group as well as equip the community with ways we can talk about adoption within our network of friends and family. I believe that no matter the age at which you were adopted or what circumstance, adoption can intersect and impact almost any part of the student or more broadly, the human experience. For example, as a student, when learning about biology and the likelihood of inheriting a specific trait or being a carrier of a specific disease, as an adoptee, we are often not able to make the same connection as our peers if we do not have access to our family medical history. Additionally, some interracial adoptees experience imposter syndrome where they are pulled between their racial, ethnic, or cultural identities that they were raised in vs. the identity that they look like or are. I believe that interracial adoptees have experiences unique to this identity regardless of how supportive or loving their adoptive families are.

A challenge that this group has experienced is gaining new membership. While we know that this community exists within all of our communities, it can be challenging to engage them. When considering the fact that many adoptees were infants when they were adopted, it can feel strange to be invited to the “UVM Adoption Group” to discuss an experience that in some ways an adoptee may not even remember! As an adoptee who was only nine months old when I was adopted, I do not have any conscious memories of who I was as an infant or what my experience was as an orphan. Yet at any given time it is possible that I am forced to confront this fact on someone else’s terms. This can be during a conversation about medical health, entering a new relationship, or talking about family. Conversely, when there isn’t an opportunity to openly discuss this identity with your community, it can feel isolating. This is why I believe in the UVM Adoption Group. Whether or not individuals feel they need the space at any given point during their college experience, I think that it is necessary to offer the space for community building, authentic conversation, and affinity for adoptees. Like any relationship, the relationship between someone and their experience as an adoptee is one that can change through time. While I was in elementary through high school all of my classmates knew that I was adopted. Once it was something that was disclosed and openly discussed once or twice early on, it was not surprising to anyone because everyone knew. Meanwhile the transition to college meant that all of a sudden no one could distinguish me as an adoptee, and no one had the context for what that meant for me. This included others being confused and being misread with an assumption that I was raised by two Chinese parents. Suddenly something that was a known fact to many was this secret that felt vulnerable to share because there was no convenient or natural fitting place to disclose this identity.

My hope is that long after I leave the practicum and the role of advisor, students continue to find community, solidarity, empowerment, and a home within the UVM Interracial Adoption Group.



**CHAPTER 6:**  
**APPLICATION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

**6.1 Dear Complements,**

*I am both alone and lonely.  
One is a source of joy, the other is lethal.*

*I advocate for self-love and am in a long-standing relationship with self-harm.  
How impossible it can be to practice what I preach.*

*I am both, and.  
I am living, breathing, walking contradictions.*

*I am Chinese and American.  
One's in my blood and the other is pure luck.*

*I am both the beginning and the end.  
My biological family tree is only me.  
How being adopted and being queer means that I will never know what it means  
to have a family that looks like the combination of blood and love.*

*I am both, and.  
I am both and.*

I wrote this short poem as a text message to a friend when I was having trouble getting to sleep one night. It is most often at night when I feel that I am at odds with myself. My contradictions that I do not give space to existing fully during the day often keep me up while I settle into my thoughts at the end of the day. Driven by productivity and keeping busy, I find myself choosing which part of myself I want to be seen in each space that I occupy. Rarely in my professional or even personal circles do I allow myself to enter fully with my complements. A theory that I have is that perhaps this is why I am so uneasy with compliments. I cannot accept and trust words of affirmations when I am consciously choosing to not show myself authentically to those around me. I am constantly left wondering if these compliments and affirmations would ring true if

someone knew the “real” me. Stemming from this fear that I would be less accepted if I was authentically me pushes me to continue to dissect each of my complements from each other. The more intensely I have pushed down who I am to keep those around me comfortable, the more intensely I have hated myself. This isolating experience is one that I believe many college-aged students experience. While understanding that college students’ experiences and identities, including age, can be as diverse as humanity itself, I believe that individuals learning about who they are separate from their family units and friends with whom they were raised can be a liberating experience. When going through a self-discovery and molding of personal identity, it can be freeing, confusing, and even terrifying. When confronted with bringing these two or more separate worlds together, it can feel like a time paradox where we are confronted with multiple versions of ourselves simultaneously. It is at the moment when you choose to value your own truth as a priority that the complements experience unity. Seemingly opposite, when I accepted each truth existing within me, I was giving myself permission to exist fully in all realities as someone who could be both, and.

## **6.2 Importance of Visibility and Representation**

In my independent study, I was the student of six authors of Color. I wrote about the power of visibility and representation within the classroom through a letter addressed to the six authors. This graduate program has been immeasurably meaningful to me because it has given me the freedom and trust to be self-driven and self-motivated. I chose each of these six books to elevate narratives around the themes and identities of race, gender, sexuality, and adoption. These are novels and memoirs that tell stories that I

rarely have an opportunity to read in traditional classroom curriculums. This is to say I often do not see my own stories and identities reflected in what's considered intellectual or academic within the classroom. The intersectionality that existed within these texts can be difficult to find in many syllabuses and I have been humbled by the opportunity to use the independent study to value authors who write stories that I see myself in.

For students who hold marginalized identities it is especially important to see themselves and their identities reflected in positive and successful examples in their environment. When walking throughout your campus, what art is showcased on the office or classroom walls? Who is memorialized as a legacy to your campus through building names or statues on the green? It is not enough to appear on the covers of a university admissions brochure. Our students should be represented in the faculty and staff, the curriculum, and in the funding of their organizations. If we are invested in the success of all students, we must recognize the unique need for support and resources for each student. To walk around campus and not see anyone who looks like you or understands where you're from can be exhausting. Instead of learning in the classroom, these students can become caught in a cycle constantly educating others. As leaders within our community it is our responsibility to notice both who is there and who isn't there and understand why. We must balance learning with and learning at the expense of our students who hold underrepresented and marginalized identities. This is another reason why SPN writing has been an empowering style for me. When taught and applied correctly, SPN writing can be incredibly powerful to both the writer and reader.

What "exactly" is a story? Who really knows... "exactly"? What is a story to you may not be a story to me. What I can say with some degree of assurance, however, is that a story serves many functions both for humanity at large and for the person

in particular. A story helps us to make connections of the disparate events, and people, that appear in our lives. A story creates order out of chaos. A story entertains. A story teaches. A story elevates. A story inspires.

- Robert J. Nash, Sydnee Viray (2014)

My thesis is my story. It is the story of twenty-five years alive and more specifically, my seven years at the University of Vermont and is a manuscript of gratitude I have for everyone who has been a part of this story. My thesis is a promise to my future students and commitments that I will not take my responsibilities for granted. I will continue to value my students, colleagues, and each relationship I have with care for the individual whole. As defined by Peter G. Northouse in the text, "Leadership," I strive to be an authentic leader who demonstrates the following characteristics:

- Authentic leaders exhibit genuine leadership.
- Authentic leaders lead from conviction.
- Authentic leaders are original, not copies.
- Authentic leaders base their actions on their values.

(2010)

Furthermore, as a young professional who holds multiple subordinated identities, I believe I have an important role in my students' experiences. I believe my stories can be a source of connection and relatability. Many of my most influential mentors have been individuals who share one or more identity with me who have shown me their inner strength that has stemmed out of the beauty of being othered.

### 6.3 “WHO ARE YOU”- Ask



**Figure 11:** *Entrance to David H. Koch Theater, New York City Ballet Art Series (2019)*

Shantell Martin asks us to consider, “WHO ARE YOU,” through her art. This question is followed by, “ARE YOU YOU” and affirmed by “YOU ARE YOU” which completes this trio of considerations. In the “Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire” from Northouse’s “Leadership,” there are four categories in which scores can be interpreted. These include, “self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency,” which together create a combined score that assesses to what degree you are an authentic leader. Before I felt ready to be responsible for giving advice to college students or felt that I had any authority to give guidance, I believed it would be important for me to investigate for myself how my moral compass directed me. Navigating through my past experiences and understanding how these have influenced my current thought processes have given me the confidence to know that I can be open minded and also understand where my prejudice, which I believe we all hold, come from.

*Though I don't remember, I remember my birth  
was my first yes. Though I was pushed, yes.  
Though there was screaming, yes. Though the light hurt, yes/*

*I wanted the yes to last forever so badly that I told myself:  
We're built like drums. We couldn't make songs  
if we had never been hit. It was a desperate theory.  
- Andrea Gibson, GOOD LIGHT*

Parallel to Andrea Gibson's "desperate theory" I have made many excuses for hurting myself and the people around me. As someone who grew up with a mission to please other people, for a long time I lost who I was and traded it in for other people's approval. Eventually, I became so lost that I didn't have a sense of self anymore. I didn't know what I believed in or what I cared about or what I liked. I felt as though I had an obligation to everyone but that I was no one. I was empty. It was easy to hurt this version of myself because I didn't know how to care about her. I believed I was only useful when I was helping other people. Letting people down was unacceptable and even punishable. Distrusting and distant from people emotionally, during this time I didn't care about myself. I was angry and unable to cope. Thankfully, this was temporary. I have since learned that I am valuable beyond my work ethic and that even when I choose myself or make a mistake, I am valuable. It took years for me to learn this truth and it wouldn't have been possible without the many meaningful relationships I have had with people who were interested in getting to know me not because of what I could do for them but out of genuine care. Although these people existed in my world long before I was open to seeing and accepting their care, I spent many lonely years not appreciating my community around me. I appreciate their patience. Once I began to explore who I am in hopes of finding a reason to live beyond being useful to others, I finally saw a small piece

of what others saw in me. This gave me hope that I was worth people's time and care. As an adoptee, I have felt "lucky" and indebted to others for being a "chosen one" when no one was asking me to prove anything. When my perspective shifted to believing that perhaps other people were also lucky to have me in their worlds, my world grew kinder and brighter.

#### **6.4 "ARE YOU YOU"- Reflect**

*I am a firm believer that first-person storytelling allows us to show up, with humility and forgiveness, in our narratives.*

*-Sydnee Viray*

I've never really liked small talk and I've never been great at networking. I'm interested in understanding and listening to what makes you, you. I don't care about the weather or how bad the traffic is. In the first four-days of training that I have with my student employees before the semester starts, I begin setting a norm for us to be wholly human. Before we talk about the job expectations and how to fulfill the role of production assistant, I am interested in learning about who is on my team. Through team building, I hope that we get to know each other individually while simultaneously creating a team pride and identity. We discuss what kind of team they'd like to be a part of and what kind of team I hope to supervise. My students will also share what they need from a supervisor to feel supported, affirmed, and challenged to grow. Through these conversations as a supervisor, I begin to understand who is on my team beyond their names, class years, and pronouns. I learn about why they wanted to work on this team, what other interests they have academically, socially, and professionally. I listen to how they want to receive feedback and I share with them how they can expect to be held accountable. Beyond this,

it no longer feels like a reach to learn about their dream job or stressors from home, school, or financially, or their favorite TV they've been keeping up with. This investment in them is often returned with an investment they make into their job and their team. This cultivates a caring, dedicated, and energized team of student employees who have each other's backs as well as my own in hopes of meeting and exceeding expectations. When someone feels genuinely cared about you are inviting them to care in return.

Through being in this graduate program, taking professional development opportunities, and volunteering alongside of working full-time, I believe I am better at my job as a result. All of these experiences have promoted my growth personally which has undoubtingly built my confidence in ways that allow me to feel more competent in my responsibilities to others. There have been many points in my life before sitting down to write these stories that have left me feeling uneasy and uncomfortable. There are versions of myself from my past that I don't think of fondly and I'm still far from where I want to be one day professionally and personally. Both are okay. It is because of my past that I am who I am today, and it is the present that is shaping my future. I get to choose to live with intention and mindfully. Where are you? As we reflect on who we are, it can be exciting to think about who we want to continue to grow into being.

## **6.5 “YOU ARE YOU”-Go Forth**

Interdisciplinary Studies Comprehensive Exam

February 17, 2019

Dear Robert J. Nash,



Three years ago, as I was preparing to graduate from the University of Vermont (UVM) the first time, I had to fulfill a capstone requirement for my Environmental Studies (ENVS) program. To earn a Bachelor of Art, I had three options within my major. I could either do an internship, write a thesis, or propose a triad of relevant courses to take that related to my concentration, “nature, culture, justice”. I opted to take three classes because to be honest, I believed it would be the easiest within my three options and was best suited for my busy schedule where I was balancing three part-time jobs and a relationship. Today I am writing to you as I prepare to graduate from the University of Vermont for the second time. I write as a graduate student in the Interdisciplinary Studies program seeking a Master of Education from the College of Education and Social Services. I am writing to complete a requirement of the graduate college to present my comprehensive exam where I will reflect on this program, my experience within it, what I’ve learned, and how I will continue to apply the skills and knowledge from this program in the work I do upon graduating. Working backwards, I will begin by sharing my current course load as a way to demonstrate how truly interdisciplinary this program has been designed to be and the personal and academic growth I have had.

In my twelve-credit course load I am writing a thesis, doing a practicum, and conducting an independent study. Each of which I had avoided while working towards a Bachelor’s. This program has prepared me to be successful within each academic commitment and has given me the courage to be ambitious. My thesis is written in the format, scholarly personal narrative which I was introduced to at the beginning of this program. At its core my thesis is about leadership within the context of higher education and my personal experiences as a college student who found their way through being

involved and investing in meaningful relationships. My practicum with the Mosaic Center for Students of Color primarily focuses on the UVM Interracial Adoption community and group. I advise and directly support the two student leaders for this group and have been working towards creating a document that captures the essence of our history, who we are, and our need for existing, manifesting as a living transition binder to ensure sustainability within the group. My independent study explores the necessity of visibility and representation through reading six books written by authors who hold historically underrepresented identities. I created this course load by collaborating with multiple individuals who also prioritize just, inclusive, and diverse academic rigor that reaches beyond the often white-centered ways of learning and teaching. For this I am deeply appreciative.

I began this program two summers ago after finishing my first year as a full-time employee within the department, University of Vermont Event Services at the Dudley H. Davis Center. I have been a part- or full- time graduate student each semester since entering the program while also working full-time in the fast-paced environment of events and student supervision and holding multiple volunteer roles within the Association for College Unions International (ACUI), the Translating Identity Conference committee (TIC), and the UVM Medical Center as a baby rocker and with Art from the Heart in the UVM Children's Hospital. I mention all of this to say how much gratitude I have for my communities who have been patient, flexible, and motivating as I balanced each of these commitments. Thank you to each of my friends who recognized when I was stressed before I was ready to admit it and bought me coffee or took a game-break with me playing Monopoly Deal or Phase 10. I did not say "yes" to

anything I did not value or care about. I have a deep appreciation for each of my involvements and I hope to have proved this through my time, energy, and intention within each of my roles. The Interdisciplinary Studies program challenged me to find a purpose in each action and interaction I have as a way to explore why I do what I do. This became an entryway to answering, “who are you” followed by, “how and why are you who you are.”

Upon graduating the environmental studies program at UVM in 2016, each student received a small, round, flattened Earth made of pewter. It was a small token of achievement and a reminder to love and protect the Earth. I believe this is what binds humanity together globally. While we may individually have pride for the town or city in which we grew up or relocated to, or pride in our nation and country, and for some maybe even in the continent that we have our roots in, geographically we are all citizens of planet Earth. Without it we could not survive. This is not to suggest that all people ought to care about the environment and all of the politics that stem from it. I understand that rallying for organic foods and labeling of GMOs cannot be everyone’s priority. Within the world of environmentalism, there are infinite points of entry including but not limited to forestry, engineering, agriculture, renewable energy, sustainability, food, climate change, oceanography, outdoor recreation, and population control. Globally we are experiencing natural disasters at unnatural rates that are devastating communities, resulting in terminal illness and irreversible destruction. These problems cannot be mitigated with shorter showers and more biking to work. As a resident of planet Earth, living within a capitalist and consumer society, I am a contributor to this problem and feel a responsibility to understand it.

Although I have decided to choose the field of education, I believe in integrating aspects of my undergraduate degree in both environmental studies and Japanese into the work I continue to do. This is interdisciplinary. As people, many of us expect Earth to sustain our humanity as we inhabit, pollute, and strip it of its resources. Within the privileges that I have, I must uphold and live by principles that protect and revitalize Earth's resources. There are people who have to decide between feeding their family food that will not leave them vulnerable to diabetes and obesity or having access to medicine necessary to keep someone with a chronic illness alive. The people who are at increased risk for having to make these challenging and life-altering decisions are often from systematically marginalized communities including those who live under the poverty line or do not have access to healthcare. When survival is on the line, how could I expect someone to choose caring about something as large as the Earth! Within our current Western culture, organic, sustainable, human-conscious, or fair-trade products are some of the least accessible. Separately, there are people who believe that environmentalism is radical, hippie or granola, and such movements are reserved for those who have time to protest barefoot about pipelines or preach about veganism. To them I would suggest they take a closer look at the role they play in this system.

As a student in the Interdisciplinary Studies program, I have had an opportunity to look inward, to understand, and dismantle the bias I carry in pursuit of finding a purpose, passion, and profession. Through learning to value and reflect on my own experiences through each of my courses in this program, it has been instilled in me the existence of a shared humanity. As you say, Robert, we are all more similar than different. Our commonalities bind us. No matter the direction I follow after my time in Burlington,

everything that I do will continue to have an environmental and human consequence because I am part of an ecosystem and we are all connected by this. Every non-living object I touch is connected to someone. As an example, when I think about the life cycle of any inanimate object, I can humanize it by recognizing the people who are being unfairly compensated to work in highly toxic work spaces to make products cheaply to be sold across the world at a price the workers couldn't consider affording. Becoming aware of these issues has become more accessible through social media, documentary films, and the internet. There are now multiple platforms that allow us to tell, share, and digest these stories. Regardless of my next job or place of work, this is my responsibility to recognize this and care.

In my statement of purpose submitted on July 10, 2017, I wrote that this program, “is the best-fit program for me as a creative and self-driven individual with multiple interests. I am interested in a program that will allow me to explore my own self through identity work, storytelling, and reclaiming my narrative as a queer, interracial adoptee.” Through my two years with you, along with Sydnee Viray and Jennifer J. J. Jang, as co-instructors, I feel indebted to you all as I have been taught to value myself in a way that had never been instilled in me. In elementary school I was always ahead of my peers in math. Not because I am smarter or my parents' strict disciplinary style but because I went to Japanese school on Saturdays where I would learn math there five months earlier than when I'd be taught the same math in my American school. In Japan the academic calendar starts in April and goes through March. For me this meant that in April I would be taught math I wouldn't begin to learn until September alongside my peers I grew up with. This benefitted me as I would appear smarter and a quicker learner than my peers

whom I spent Monday through Friday with. Teachers thought this too. That is, until seventh grade hit, and I stopped going to Japanese school after graduating elementary school.

Of course, I still attended public school where I was no longer “especially talented” at math compared to my peers through middle and high school. In fact, it didn’t take too long before I was suddenly behind the curve. I did well-enough in school as it has been in my nature to please others and especially those in authority such as teachers, but I have never been studious or believed I was a “good student.” While being a graduate student, instances I felt most validated as a “good student” came from comments made by my peers. These moments where I felt most proud were not about my ability to comprehend a reading or even about my own writing. When I responded to my peers’ work in a way that showed them that I care, that they are being listened to, and I am genuinely interested in what they had to say, I felt I was being a “good student.” This program does not value intellect alone or the ability to cite properly or integrate the most research, this program values our voice, our experiences, our inquiries, and our stories.

There are three times that I recall crying in a classroom in my life. The first was in second grade Japanese school when I dozed off and wasn’t paying attention and I was called upon by the teacher at the front of the room and I was jolted out of my gaze and cried because I was embarrassed. That time I actually couldn’t stop crying and had to be pulled out of school early. The second was in twelfth grade physics class where part of our group assignment was to sing altered lyrics to a pop song in front of the class. Our group chose to alter the lyrics to Fun’s *We Are Young* and not more than a few words in, I was standing with my group in front of our class and I was crying. I surprised my teacher,

my peers, and myself that day. My teacher brought me into the lab closet so the whole thing would be a little less public, but I don't recall what happened after that. Again, I cried as a response to overwhelming embarrassment. The last time I cried in a classroom was in your philosophy of education course with Jennifer. I was overcome by humility and humbled by the entire class. The week prior I shared a paper I wrote titled, *Dear Body*. I was vulnerable and read the entire piece aloud to an attentive class who complimented my writing and asked questions about what I shared. I felt good about reading but when I was asked about how I felt afterwards I decided to answer, "You may think you know me, but you don't. I shared what I was comfortable sharing" as a way to distance myself from my peers. I don't take compliments easily and when I feel people getting too close, I have a habit of pushing them away. When I cried in class I explained, "last week I said boldly that you all don't know me. You kindly affirmed my writing and sensitively probed about my writing process and my story. You were supportive and I shut it down by abruptly ending the circle with pushing you out. I'm sorry. I did it out of habit. I don't like to let people in typically," I apologized. It was one of the first times I consciously recognized when I was fueling a disconnect with others. This habit has left me feeling isolated and hopeless over and over, but I never understood how it was happening until that moment. I cried because of the kindness that class showed me and how ashamed I felt for not accepting it.

No matter what work or personal stress I experienced in the last two years, your courses have been the perfectly fit outlet to reflect upon and write about what I was going through. Whether it was a course about philosophy, religion, ethics, or writing, with the through line of education, I was able to make sense of feelings, conflicts, and stress that I

previously couldn't be in tune with enough to even acknowledge their existence. As I prepare to exit this program, I feel ready to share myself with others in a way I have not been willing to before because I finally believe that I am more than someone who can work hard behind the scenes. As an educator, I have something worth teaching others from my own experience. This new-found confidence and self-worth will propel me into a career built on authentic relationships and genuine care for not only others and position I hold but with myself, too.

Confidently,

A. Lewis



**Figure 12:** *Holding pewter Earth trinket (2016)*



March 2019

Dear Reader,

My motivation for becoming a holistic and authentic leader and supervisor of college students comes from my desire to cultivate meaningful relationships. Through the mentorships I had with staff and faculty as a college student, I manifested the leadership potential that was seen in me. Through finding a community and building open and trusting relationships with individuals, I am hopeful for my future. As an educator and supervisor, I believe we all have a responsibility to listen to our students. We have a lot to learn from our students' lived experiences. There is wisdom that is beyond a textbook that cannot be taught by professing facts. When we as leaders invest time, intention, and compassion into our work with students, we can reach a level of responsibility and efficiency that work ethic alone cannot attain.

Thank you for coming along for the ride. To write this thesis, I had to make many stops along the way to refuel. This looked like dozens of coffee cups and kettles of tea with honey, good food and company, and games, games, games! There were weeks where my attention was pulled in so many directions that I had to take a break from writing. What was important during these idle writing periods was ultimately my drive to share my story by way of completing this thesis. I believe in my thesis and I hope you too feel it was worth your time.

Warmly,

A. Lewis

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